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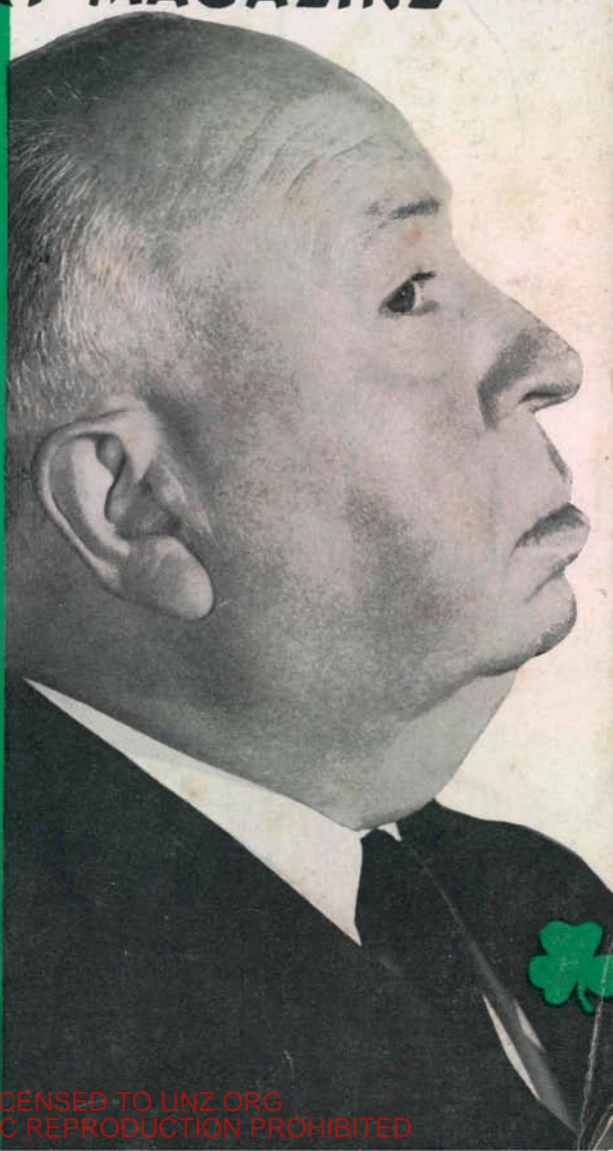
# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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**NEW** stories  
presented by  
the master  
of **SUSPENSE**

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March 1966

Dear Readers:

The month of March connotes different things to many people living all over the world. It represents three borrowing days from April, according to an old saying common to both England and Scotland. In the United States it means St. Patrick's Day, and wearin' of the green, as typified by the shamrock which I have in evidence on the cover. To others it means an influx of seed catalogs, perhaps the purchase of new garden tools, and the release from indoor living. To young mothers it means blessed departure from the back-breaking ordeal of putting on and taking off galoshes and ski suits.

To my readers I feel certain this March issue will impart a fresh, spring-like aura of excitement to the pursuit of mystery and suspense.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

Vol. 11, No. 3, March 1966. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions \$6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. © 1966 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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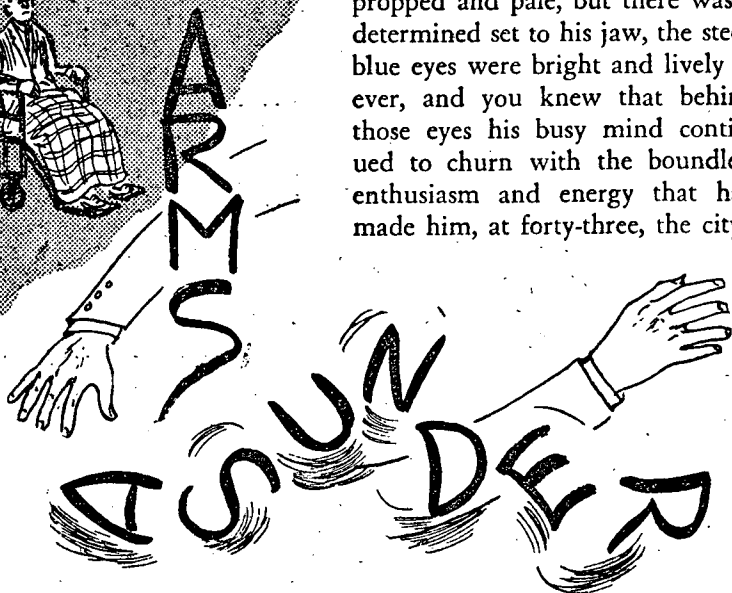
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*The dissipation of winter's first snowfall does not guarantee obliteration of any residual scars.*

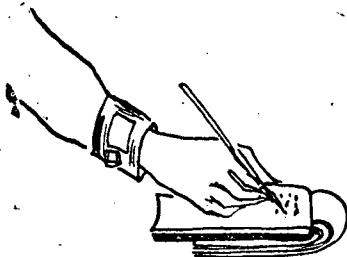


the foot of the high bed. He was propped and pale, but there was a determined set to his jaw, the steel-blue eyes were bright and lively as ever, and you knew that behind those eyes his busy mind continued to churn with the boundless enthusiasm and energy that had made him, at forty-three, the city's



**OFFICIAL** word came from the doctors on the one hundredth day following the automobile accident: H. D. Cartwell would not walk again for months and then only with the aid of crutches.

He had summoned us, as a master summons trained dogs, to the hospital room and now we stood obediently in a semicircle around



best newspaper publisher—and an impossible man to work for if you did not like him.

He stabbed his legs with stiff forefingers, then said crisply, "No feeling. I can't move them. But I'm going home tomorrow. I'll be in a wheelchair."

To my left Benjamin Warner, bachelor and advertising genius, shuffled nervous feet and continued unconsciously to move his hat through his fingers as if smoothing the sweatband. On my right, blonde, athletic and attractive Constance Sable, who had started at the newspaper as a counter girl in the classified advertising department and in ten ruthless months was H. D.'s private secretary, drew a tiny breath that caught in her throat. Beyond Constance, and partly blocked from my view by the secretary's youthful body, sat Laura, handsome, unmoving, expressionless, and H. D.'s wife of twenty years.

"Matt," H. D. said, "you will as-



sume command at the office. Your decisions will be final. You will answer only to me for them."

I nodded and his blue eyes switched to his secretary. "Connie, make a note for the business office. Matt is to be compensated an additional fifty dollars per week, retroactive to the date of my accident."

"Yes, sir," she said, quickly scribbling on the notepad in her hand.

I watched his face for reaction to the echo of bitterness Constance managed to convey, but there was none. The blue eyes swept us. "Each of you is a right arm," he said. "I hope for maximum efforts every hour of every day. Are there questions?"

No one stirred.

"All right," he said. "We will meet tomorrow night in my home. Eight o'clock. I plan to meet with each of you daily. The hour will be determined by circumstance and convenience until we establish a schedule. That's all for now, people."

"H. D.?" Constance Sable interjected and there was a brief, tight silence until she continued. "I'm sorry. A man so young . . ."

"Forget it," the publisher interrupted curtly. "I have one satisfaction. I did not die. There are some who wish I had."

Constance gaped, Benjamin Warner shuffled, and I stood root-

ed as I saw Laura Cartwell leave the chair to stand tall and regal. She went to her husband, brushed thick hair from his forehead with a long-fingered hand, then lightly kissed his brow and said, "Try to sleep, H. D. I'll return this evening."

He waved us out of the room. Constance was tight-lipped. Laura's display of affection had pinked the secretary. She joined Benjamin Warner, and he took her elbow as if she needed assistance. His crooked grin for me was imperious before he escorted her from the room. Neither cared for me, nor I for them. We all were right arms, all right, but I was the strong right arm.

H. D. said flatly, "Please escort Mrs. Cartwell to her car, Matt."

His bright eyes and pale face were expressionless and remained that way as we left the room. Constance and Benjamin were not in sight. We rode the elevator in silence to the ground floor and walked out of the building. I stopped Laura on the top step. We were alone. The afternoon was cold, the sun was bright, and there was a haze building in the west sky. The season's first snow was in the offing. I saw Constance and Benjamin moving along the sidewalk. They disappeared around a corner of the building.

"Matt?" Laura said softly, "did he mean us?"

"A newspaperman makes enemies daily, Laura."

"Does he know?"

"No."

"I love you," she breathed.

I took her arm and escorted her down the steps and around the building into the parking lot. I put her into the front seat of the new sedan and then stood looking down at her. "We can't go up to the cabin this weekend, can we?"

"No," she said solemnly. "Not with him coming home. I'll have to stay with him."

"And in the future?"

"I don't know," she said, then drove away.

Snow fell that night, and continued through Thursday. By Thursday evening, the radio and TV announcers were advising residents to remain in their homes. I decided against driving, and took a cab out to the palatial mansion that had been in the Cartwell family for generations. As the driver wove expertly along the streets that were beginning to become clogged, I allowed my thoughts to drift also.

I was a self-made man, having begun as a green reporter for H. D. Cartwell's father. I had a university degree and, in those days, determination. No more. I had

worked my way up fast, had married and sired a son. In the month prior to a coronary death, the senior Cartwell had made me the managing editor of his newspaper. On his deathbed he had asked me to remain with his son. I had now, for seven years, long, arduous, emotional years.

Somewhere my marriage had soured and my wife, taking my son, had disappeared. In the beginning I had searched for them without success, then the hopelessness of the search had engulfed me and I had turned briefly to the bottle and its effervescence.

Laura Cartwell had rescued me. At her husband's request, she had come to me, listened, talked, rationalized, reestablished a sense of direction for me and produced a fresh, if not ethical, horizon. We fell in love with each other. The enormity of that love had not caught up with us until now, suddenly augmented by an automobile accident. We were trapped.

There had been a day when we had discussed going to H. D. but now we were being forced to concentrate on continued discretion—a discretion that I was not sure had been totally cloaking despite my positiveness with Laura on the hospital step the previous afternoon. Had there been a not-so-subtle message for Laura and me

in H. D.'s words to Constance Sable? Had he been barbing us about what doors his death might open?

The driver stopped the cab and I was surprised to see we were at the Cartwells'. There was a lone car in the parkway of the drive, Benjamin Warner's station wagon. I checked my watch. Ten minutes before eight o'clock. Was I the second to arrive, or had Warner brought Constance Sable with him?

"Mister, I hope you're figurin' on stayin' the night here," the cab driver said as he produced change for me. "'Nother couple o' hours and nobody in this town is gonna be movin'. Not even me. Ain't this a helluva snow for the first of the season?"

I chuckled hollowly at the driver's remark as I hunched deep inside my coat and trotted through the thick snowflakes up the steps to the wide veranda. Remain the night here? Me in the same house with Laura and her husband? Constance, Benjamin and H. D.? Now there was a warped triangle. Constance Sable, girlishly attracted to H. D., Benjamin Warner puisantly attracted to Connie; and H. D. not particularly attracted to either other than for what they could produce for him at his newspaper.

The maid showed me into the library. H. D. was in a wheelchair



deep in the recess of the luxurious room. A lightweight robe covered his legs, but from the waist up he was, as always, impeccable in dress and physical appearance. Behind him flames crackled comfortably in the fireplace. To his left Constance Sable and Benjamin Warner sat in wing chairs. I did not see Laura.

H. D. grinned. "Great night to be out, eh, Matt?" he said jovially.

"Great," I said, puzzling over his high spirits.

The puzzlement was quickly dispelled. Benjamin Warner had, that day, landed a new and lucrative advertising account. They were drinking to Warner's talent and success. I accepted a mug from the maid.

"Hot rum," H. D. grinned. "Good for the bloodstream."

We launched into business. An hour passed swiftly. I did not see Laura. Where was she?

H. D. brought me back to the huddle. "Tomorrow night at eight, Matt?"

I knew I was being dismissed, while Benjamin Warner and Constance Sable were not. That disturbed me, but I nodded and stood.

H. D.'s face was briefly blank as he looked up at me, then the grin appeared again. "I have some more things to discuss with Benjamin," he said. "You and I are finished

and you may leave unless, of course, you wish to wait for him. You came by cab, I believe."

"I'll call for another," I said.

It was then that Laura appeared. Later I was to wonder if she had been eavesdropping, had selected that instant to enter the library. She was beautiful and stately in a tailored, wool slack suit. She nodded and smiled; and then the smile was for me alone.

"You are leaving, Matt?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'll drive you."

My heart thumped, but she seemed at ease as she went to her husband and put a hand on his shoulder. "All right, H. D.?" she asked. "I'm really quite bored, and you know I love snowstorms."

His flip of a hand seemed almost reflexive. "Sure," he said, but did not look at either of us.

I said perfunctory farewells, accepted Constance Sable's stare and Benjamin Warner's crooked smile without allowing my irritation to show, then joined Laura outside the library. She had already donned an expensive car coat and fastened a scarf under her chin. She led me through the house and into the attached garage.

We were alone now and I put a hand on her arm as she moved behind the steering wheel of the



sedan. "Is this smart?" I asked her.

She said, "Push the wall button, please."

The garage door slid up. I joined Laura. She backed the car from the stall, pushed a dash button, watched the garage door come down into place, then backed expertly through the snow and turned down the drive. The night was becoming wild. The snow had thickened and the wind had picked up. We turned into the street. Snowdrifts had already pushed out from the curbs. The lone driving lane was in the center of the street and it was a weaving course.

I put a hand on Laura's arm again and said, "You may have trouble getting back from downtown."

She braked carefully then, stopped the car and turned toward me. The lines of her face were softly shadowed in the dashlight. "Kiss me, Matt," she said.

I kissed her.

She telephoned her husband from my apartment. "I can't make it back, H. D. I've taken a room at the Hotel Chamberlain. Will you be all right?"

From across the room, I studied her face as I mixed drinks. We had stopped at the Chamberlain on the way to my apartment. She had checked into a room, had the se-

dan put in the hotel garage, then had used a back stairway to leave the hotel and join me on the windswept street corner where I had managed to commandeer a taxi. Now she was impassive and beautiful in the subdued lamplight as she conversed in soft tones with her husband.

She put the phone together carefully and came to me. We embraced and kissed. "I love you," she whispered.

The jangle of my telephone was a rude intruder. I allowed it to ring several times. Then, attempting to make my voice sound as if I had been aroused from deep sleep, I picked up the receiver.

H. D.'s crisp voice asked, "Is my wife with you, Matt?"

"Your . . ." I jerked erect, put a palm across Laura's lips and shook my head at her. My heart was thumping so hard I was sure H. D. could hear its beat, but with forced calmness I said, "I think she checked in at the Chamberlain, H. D."

"She did," he said. "I called, but she isn't in her room. At least, she doesn't answer the telephone. I thought you two might have decided to ride out the storm together. You are two of a kind in that respect. Both of you like snow, storms, the outdoors—"

"I can go to the Chamberlain,

H. D. It's only eight blocks. I can find her, have her call you."

"Have you looked out your window, Matt? It's raging. The snow is so thick—"

"I can walk, H. D. I don't mind. I like—"

"Forget it, Matt. Laura probably has found a friend. She probably went to the cocktail lounge after checking in, met another woman, and is with the woman now in another room. I'll call her later."

"Well—"

"I said forget it, Matt. Look out your window. That's all you have to do. Call me from the office later today, eh? I doubt if we will be able to meet as arranged. I think we're going to be snow-bound for at least two days. Sorry I interrupted your sleep."

"It's all right, H. D."

I put the phone down, then sat for a few moments drawing deep breaths and wondering if my heart were going to leap from its chest cage. Finally I turned and faced Laura. She had not moved. Her lips were tight, her eyes wide and unblinking. There was a tiny muscle ticing in her jawline.

"He called the hotel," I said bluntly. "You are not in your room."

"He knows, doesn't he?" she breathed.

"I think he does," I said slowly.

"But he also provided an out." I repeated her husband's speculation about the cocktail lounge and meeting another woman. "At least it will be an out if you are there to answer the phone the next time he calls."

She left the divan and went to the closet while I remained rooted. "Why?" I asked aloud. "Why would he provide an out if he really knows?"

"He loves me, Matt," she said from the closet.

"Yes," I agreed, standing. I lit a cigarette while my thoughts churned. I went to one of the front windows and looked out. Snow swirled in gusts through the night. I couldn't hear the wind, but I knew it was blowing a gale.

Suddenly I turned and called, "Laura!"

She was beside me instantly, her fingers digging into my arm. She now wore her coat and the scarf was knotted beneath her chin.

"Look . . . across the street," I said.

There was a car parked at the curb over there—a station wagon. The snow swirls parted briefly to allow a clear view. I saw a tiny glow come alive and then disappear, and I knew the person sitting behind the steering wheel of the wagon was smoking.

"Wh-at about it?" Laura stam-



M. M. M. M. M.

mered peering out the, window. "Isn't that Benjamin Warner's car?" I asked.

I remembered the meeting: Warner already there when I arrived; H. D. jovial; Warner stonefaced. My dismissal before Warner and Constance were to leave; H. D.'s abrupt approval of his wife driving me downtown, even in a vicious snowstorm; Warner's crooked grin as we were leaving; H. D. on the phone, checking on his wife. And now Warner's car across the street with someone obviously inside, watching the building where I had an apartment:

Was H. D. Cartwell that perceptive? Had he confided in Warner? Had it not been a new advertising account that had pleased them, or had it been a plan to trap us? Such a scheme would please Warner—and Constance. It would catapult both into being much more than just another right arm, would make them *the* strong right arms while it would strip me.

Another thought struck me. On the phone H. D. had said, "*Look out your window, Matt. That's all you have to do.*"

"What are we going to do, Matt?" Laura stammered, her fingernails digging into my arm as if they were daggers. "Are you sure . . . are you sure that's Benjamin Warner's car?"

"He's spying on us for H. D.!"

I unleashed my thoughts in a rush of words.

Laura returned to the divan and sat stiffly for a long time before she finally said, "What if we are only *imagining* that H. D. has discovered us, Matt? What if he were sincere in his speculation on the telephone a few moments ago?"

"You are grasping, Laura," I said flatly.

"Am I?" she asked sharply. "What if our thinking is wrong? I know my husband, Matt. I've lived with the man twenty years. H. D. would not confide in Benjamin Warner. He would turn to his attorneys. He might employ the service of a private detective agency. He—"

"Do you think Benjamin Warner is outside right now, sitting in a snowstorm, spying on us, on his own?" I croaked.

"Couldn't he be?"

"But why?"

"He and Constance Sable. Neither likes you, Matt, and I'm sure I am not Constance Sable's favorite person. She is infatuated with my husband."

"Yes," I agreed.

"Both are important to H. D., but neither has your importance to the man. Think of it from their points of view. They discover us and it gives each a potential weap-

on. We could be at their mercy."

I stood up.

"Where are you going?" Laura asked quickly.

"There is a back way out of the building. I'm taking you to the hotel. I only hope we get there before H. D. attempts another call."

"I'll go alone," she said peremptorily. "Why expose ourselves more than we have? Why take a chance of someone seeing us trudging together through a snowstorm, entering the hotel at this hour?"

She made sense, but I didn't like the thought of her going alone. I took her arms, held her in front of me, looked into her eyes. "Laura, there has to be a decision one way or the other. We have to break, or you have to leave H. D."

"I know," she said softly and kissed me. "But let me test him. Let me return to the hotel now and to him tomorrow. Let me be with him. I will know if tonight has been the result of scheming in his mind. We can plan from there."

"Plan?"

"We'll have to think of something, darling," she whispered. "We cannot allow H. D. or anyone else to crucify us."

Long after I had let her out the back door of the building and watched her disappear into the swirls of snow, I pondered her words. I sensed a presentiment in

them that I tried to ignore.

When I returned to my apartment, the station wagon that had been parked across the avenue was gone.

It had quit snowing when H. D. telephoned me at ten-thirty the next morning, but the city was plugged, and more than one-half of our staff, including Benjamin Warner and Constance Sable, had not arrived at the office.

"I found my wife," H. D. said curtly.

I gripped the phone receiver hard, not knowing whether to feel relieved or afraid.

"It was as I supposed," H. D. said. "She met someone in the cocktail lounge and they were together."

There did not seem to be anything I could say.

H. D. launched into business. "Do you have enough staff to produce a paper?"

I assured him we did. "Circulation will be the problem."

He agreed, then said, "Incidentally, I have Connie here at the house. I asked her to remain the night. I have correspondence to get out and I wasn't sure she would be able to return here today."

*Scratch Constance Sable from being with Benjamin Warner on his spy mission.*

H. D. went on. "Benjamin is

flying into New York, today if he can get a flight. An agency there is attempting to squirm out of a contract."

"All right," I said.

"Any major problems there at the office?"

"None."

"Then I won't plan on seeing you before Monday."

"Okay."

I waited an hour before I called the Chamberlain and asked for Mrs. H. D. Cartwell. She lifted the receiver after the first ring.

"I thought you might be sleeping," I said.

"I haven't slept. I've been thinking. When the highway is clear, I'm going up to the cabin, Matt darling. I've decided I have to get away from H. D. and the house."

"And me?"

There was a brief silence. I imagined her sitting there, biting her underlip before she answered, "No, not you, darling, but don't come to me. I want to be alone. I want to think."

I tempered a brief flash of irritation. "All right, but here's something else to think about. Connie Sable spent the night in your home. She's there now."

Laura remained silent.

"It's business," I said.

"But what kind?" Laura asked softly.

There was a tiny click in my ear and I stared at the receiver. I was strongly tempted to dial again, but I put the phone together slowly. Was Laura disturbed about a relationship developing between her husband and Constance Sable? Laura loved me—not her husband—didn't she?

The city slowly came alive that Friday. Streets were opened and people began to move again. I checked and learned that Benjamin Warner had been put on a mid-afternoon flight to New York City. Constance Sable came into the office about four o'clock, but she did not look at me or speak. She went to her desk and began typing furiously. I considered phoning the Chamberlain again, but decided against it.

The weekend passed monotonously slowly for me. I worried through it, attempting to decide what course of action Benjamin Warner might take, what pressure he might apply if he were convinced he had discovered Laura and me. I was satisfied now that Constance Sable was not involved, other than her infatuation for H. D., and I breathed easier as I told myself that Laura was right: if H. D. suspected, he would not turn to Benjamin Warner. He would turn to his attorneys or to detectives.

I drove out to the mansion Monday morning and found H. D. alone with his house staff. His wife had gone to their cabin north of the city for a week. He told me he expected Benjamin Warner to return on Thursday.

I saw Benjamin in the office Thursday afternoon. He waved and gave me a crooked grin, but hurried off without speaking.

In Friday morning's second mail I received a short, unsigned letter telling Laura Cartwell and me to be prepared to produce fifty thousand dollars in cash if we wished our clandestine love affair to remain a secret. There were two tape recordings, the letter said. The tapes had been made at H. D.'s cabin on weekends when that cabin had been occupied by Laura and myself. *Payment is expected next Friday*, the letter said. *You will be informed how and where.*

Laura paced the cozy front room of the rustic cabin and lit a fresh cigarette from the butt in her fingertips. Her face was flushed. She beat clenched hands against her thighs as she paced. She stopped, reread the letter, dropped it on the coffee table in front of me and resumed pacing.

"It can't be from H. D.," she said in a voice that cracked. "There is no logic in blackmail if—"

"Benjamin Warner," I broke in.

"We know it's Benjamin, Laura."

I went to a window and looked outside. The night was bright and tranquil. A large moon produced light that sparkled against the undisturbed layer of snow. I stared down through the trees that dotted the side of the hill. Below the trees was the main highway, but the strip of concrete was not visible from the window.

"If it's Benjamin," Laura said tautly from somewhere behind me, "how did he get in here to hide the recorder? The cabin is locked when not in use. The doors are solid and the locks are good."

"Somehow he obtained a key. Or perhaps he found an unlocked window."

"But how did he discover us?" Laura asked. "We have been careful, Matt. We have—"

"How is no longer important," I interrupted, turning from the window. Laura stood leaning against the mantle of the fireplace now, her hands widespread and her stare fixed on the flames. "The point is, he did, and he is a more despicable man than I even imagined!"

Laura shook her head. "I can't rid myself of the notion that it is H. D.," she said softly. "He has a key. He could have come up here anytime. We don't know what has been recorded. We don't know



when it was recorded. It could have been last summer. It could have been—”

“We’re trapped, Laura.”

She faced me slowly. She stood tall and silent, measuring me. I saw determination inching over her. Her jaw came forward. Her mouth thinned.

“Matt,” she said softly, “we are trapped only if we resist, if we deny. Do you truly love me?”

“I love you,” I said.

“Then we are not trapped. We admit our love,” she said triumphantly. “We tell the world, my husband, Benjamin Warner to go to hell! I’m ready, Matt!”

I wanted to shout. *Laura was mine!*

I took her in my arms and kissed her long and savoringly. We heard the sound of a car rolling across the packed snow, then stopping in the parking area in front of the cabin, but neither of us flinched. I went to the door, opened it wide, and watched Benjamin Warner step from the station wagon and walk toward me.

I glanced at Laura over my shoulder, laughed softly, then made a sweeping gesture with my arm and stepped aside to allow Benjamin Warner to enter the cabin.

“What is this?” he rasped, stopping just inside the door.

I gently closed the door. “No blackmail, Warner,” I said victoriously. “We don’t pay a dime. I may smash your face, but we don’t pay a dime.”

He backed a couple of steps, looking as if he were confronted by a pair of killers. His eyes narrowed. They flashed to Laura, came to me, then returned to Laura and held. “What the devil is this?” he wheezed. “Why did you call me? What is this about a fortune for me if I drove up here tonight?”

I struck him hard. I drove a left fist into his middle, doubling him forward, and brought a right up against his teeth. He pitched back with a howl, hit a wall, and slumped down to lie half propped on an elbow. His eyes were glassy and a bubble of blood formed on his lips.

“Matt!” Laura shrielled. She clutched my arm and stopped me.

I stood there, angry but triumphant, as I watched Benjamin Warner shake his head, wipe the blood from his mouth and push himself up into a sitting position. He was a long time getting his head up and I wanted to laugh aloud when I saw the fear in his eyes.

“Y-you two . . . are crazy,” he managed.

I laughed.

Laura’s fingers dug into my arm.

"Wait a minute, Matt," she whispered. "Something is wrong!"

Then she squatted in front of Benjamin Warner. "You said someone called you?"

"That's right," he snarled.

He was coming around fast now. He sat up straighter. His eyes were dark and angry. He pushed Laura from him. "That's right," he repeated. "You! You called me, Mrs. Cartwell! You said you had a proposition! You said if I drove up here tonight, I—"

"No!" Laura hissed. "I didn't telephone you! I . . ."

She cut off the words as I caught her shoulders. I pulled her up beside me. What was this? Was I somehow being suckered?

"Well, *somebody* phoned me!" Benjamin Warner bleated. His eyes darted from Laura to me. "What is this, Matt? What kind of game are you two playing?"

"Were you sitting in your car across the street from my place the night of the snowstorm last week?" I shot at him.

"Yes," he said defiantly. "I've had a hunch about you two for a long time, but—"

"How many other times have you spied on us?"

"Never!"

"And you've never used a tape recorder?"

"A tape . . . Why would I use

a tape recorder? What would . . . Man, I don't even know how to operate a recorder!"

"This phone call—"

"It was a woman!" he rasped. "A woman called me at my office, said she was Laura Cartwell, said she wanted to talk to me, that she had a proposition that might mean a lot of money to me! It was her, all right, Matt! It was Laura Cartwell!"

I turned to Laura. She was shaking her head and cowering a bit. "No, Matt," she whispered. "I didn't call him. I didn't call anyone."

Benjamin Warner was on his feet now. I caught his arm and jerked him across the room. I shoved the blackmail letter at him. "Read it!" I snarled. "And tell me you didn't write it!"

The sound of the shot was deafening. I yelled and fell across the coffee table. I rolled and saw Laura coming down toward me, her body twisting, her mouth gaping, blood gushing from the side of her head. I yelled again and rolled out of her path. She crashed to the floor beside me.

The second shot sent Benjamin Warner pitching back against the fireplace. He hung there until the third shot split his surprised face. He slumped slowly. Then there was only the silence and the smell of death.

Slowly I sat up against the front of the couch. I turned, got up on my knees and inched my head up until my eyes were above the back of the couch. There was no one in the room, no sound; only the shattered window opposite me and glass splinters on the carpeting.

Laura Cartwell and Benjamin Warner had been easy targets for someone who had stood outside that window. *But why hadn't I been killed?*

I bolted to the front door, yanked it open and dashed outside. Nothing. I raced around to the side of the cabin. There I saw the tracks in the snow below the window.

Hugging the cabin wall, I inched forward and stared at the tracks as they turned and disappeared down the slope and into the trees.

I looked through the broken window and the sight of the bodies brought panic sweeping through me. I turned and ran to my car, then drove recklessly down the hill and skidded onto the highway. I pointed the car toward the city and drove without thinking. Only when I was back in my apartment, downing liquor straight from the bottle, did reason begin to seep back into my mind. It was difficult to accept what had happened. I had to think, I had to think . . .

H. D. was the only answer. H. D.'s scheming mind had devised the murder plot. H. D. had the money to hire a killer. H. D. had designed the blackmail letter, knowing that it would send me to the cabin and Laura. H. D. had paid an anonym to telephone Benjamin Warner and imitate his wife. I had not been killed because H. D. wanted me to suffer the trial for and conviction of double murder. H. D. was a sadist. He wanted to see me squirm.

*It meant there actually were tape recordings! When the bodies were discovered, police would inventory Benjamin Warner's duplex unit! They would find the tapes made by H. D.—who had access to the cabin—and later planted in the duplex!*

For the first time in my life I planned a forced entry. I stood hunched in the one o'clock quiet of the icy morning, prepared to bolt at the slightest sound. I had walked half the length of an alley and now stood at a ground floor window of the duplex unit. Behind me and no more than forty feet away was another brick unit. I crouched in the dark and studied the neighboring place. I was perspiring profusely despite the cold. The windows of the unit were black, but were there eyes in that

blackness, eyes now trained on me, waiting for me to enter Benjamin Warner's place before a frantic call to police headquarters was made?

I finally forced the storm and permanent window far enough open to allow entry, and had the presence of mind to close both behind me. Then I searched. It did not take long to find the tapes. They were boxed and in a bedroom bureau drawer.

I pocketed the tapes, used the windows again, closed them, and scuffed through the snow. There would be tracks for the police to discover, but they would not be telltale footprints.

I did not remember the condemning blackmail letter until I was letting myself into my own apartment. I returned to my car and drove out of the city again. Nothing at the cabin had changed. The lamps gave no light, the front door was open, the flames in the fireplace continued to crackle, the bodies lay grotesquely, the letter was on the coffee table. I started to put it into the fireplace, then remembered how our gifted police could make fantastic discoveries in sifted ashes. I took the letter to my apartment, burned it and flushed it away. When I turned from the bath, I felt exhaustion and a vast sense of relief. I was sure I had outsmarted H. D. Cart-

well, had left nothing undone.

The police got me out of deep sleep at ten-thirty in the morning. They arrested me. They charged me with double murder. They produced two tape recordings found in Benjamin Warner's apartment. They said they were surmising Warner had been, or had threatened to blackmail Laura Cartwell. They said Laura had confided in me, and that I had devised a plan for her to lure Warner to the cabin. They said I had stood outside the window and shot Warner. *Then they said* I had accidentally killed Laura, or had decided it was time to end my affair with her.

They had found the murder weapon in the snow near the parking lot. I had dropped it as I ran from the cabin to the lot. There were no fingerprints on the gun, stolen from a pawn shop earlier in the year, but that was understandable. I had been outside. It was cold. I had worn gloves.

I told them about the tracks in the snow, but all they did was grunt. The jury didn't believe me either . . .

H. D. did not miss one minute of my trial and conviction. Each day he was wheeled into the courtroom by his secretary. They sat side by side, stonefaced, and watched the proceedings. Both

were called to the stand as prosecution witnesses. Neither could provide damaging testimony. Both professed ignorance of an affair between Laura and me, or of a triangle that might involve Benjamin Warner. H. D. stared at me all the time he was on the stand. Constance Sable did not look at me.

Four months after my conviction, they were married and honeymooned at a ski lodge in Switzerland. Daily I visualized H. D. sitting high on a balcony of the lodge, sunning himself, while below his new wife glided gracefully along the ski trails. The vision was one of those nagging things. I could not rid myself of it. There was something wrong with it . . .

The murderer had to be someone close enough to discover the love between Laura and me, someone who knew where we clandestinely met, someone who had obtained a key to the hill cabin, someone who could secrete a recorder and later retrieve the tapes, someone who knew Laura had gone to the cabin, someone who would know that a blackmail let-

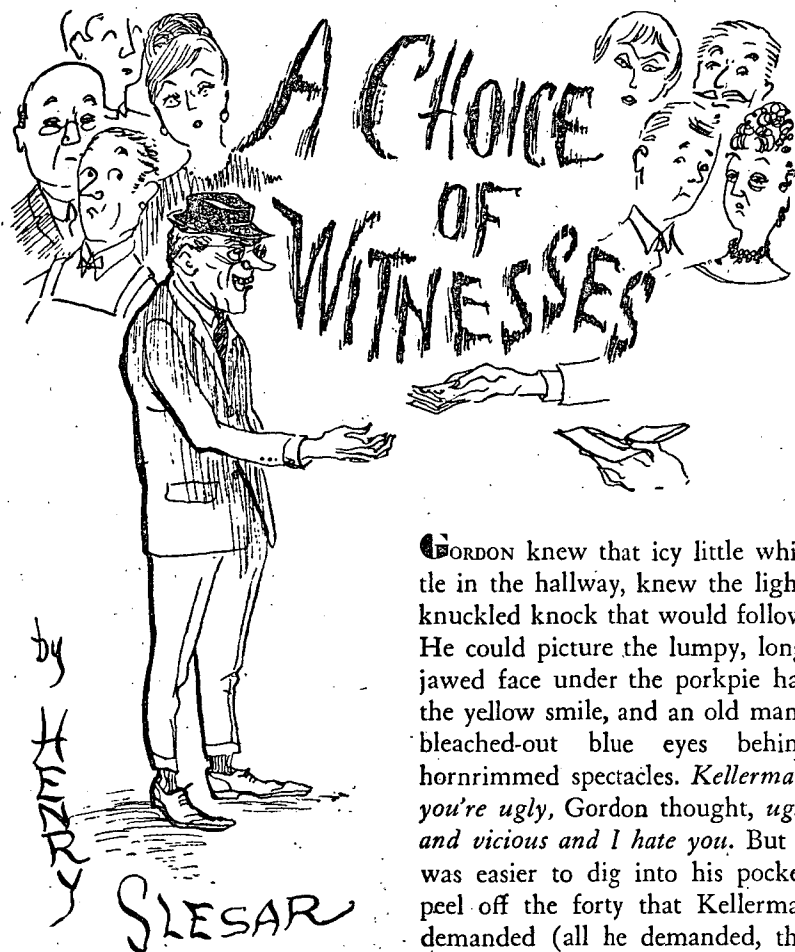
ter would send me to her, someone who would know that a promise of a fortune also would send Benjamin Warner. There had to be someone who had enough motive to slay two people in cold blood then leave me as a killer, someone who could have thrown the murder weapon toward the parking lot then skied away from the window, someone who had planted two fake tapes in Benjamin Warner's duplex unit, watched me steal them, then had the legs to return to the unit and plant the damaging tapes.

I had thought the murderer's motive was revenge. But what if it had been greed? That now seemed more likely.

I wondered how long it would be before H. D. Cartwell—in a fit of depression over his physical handicap, of course—would plunge from the balcony of a Swiss ski lodge and die on the rocks below. I wondered how long it would be before a new—and wealthy—widow would be skiing along new trails in another section of the world . . .



*If one reckons on "safety in numbers", the credibility of a witness may be unimpeachable, yet one must be cognizant that individuals do not view simultaneously from the same angle.*



GORDON knew that icy little whistle in the hallway, knew the light-knuckled knock that would follow. He could picture the lumpy, long-jawed face under the porkpie hat, the yellow smile, and an old man's bleached-out blue eyes behind hornrimmed spectacles. *Kellerman, you're ugly*, Gordon thought, *ugly and vicious and I hate you*. But it was easier to dig into his pocket, peel off the forty that Kellerman demanded (all he demanded, this considerate, charitable blackmailer)

shove it into the wrinkled white hand, and be done with it for another month.

The extortion payment had become one of life's fixed expenses, like the rent and the electric bill and Pamela's book club fees. Nor did he hide the fact of Kellerman's existence from his wife. To Pam, Kellerman was just another remittance man; she had no idea what service he rendered, paid no attention to the boring world of finance. Her world was arranging art exhibits, joining book clubs, walking their two children in the park, taking night school courses in political history. Gordon loved her very much. The thought of Kellerman ever telling her that dirty story, showing her those photographs of him and that girl, made Gordon's flesh crawl and a tic start in the corner of his right eye.

But Kellerman wouldn't tell, of course. He wasn't interested in spoiling idyllic marriages. Like the good, professional blackmailer he was, Kellerman had a code of ethics. Pay up, and Kellerman's silence was assured. Gordon might have gone on paying his forty dollars, month in and month out, except for the Inflation.

"It's the Inflation," Kellerman said one day, forgetting to give Gordon his customary yellow grin. The porkpie hat, with its grease-

stained band, twisted in his pasty hands. "It's just a ten-dollar increase, Mr. Brinton. The price of everything is up." So humble, he might have been an employee begging for a raise.

"All right," Gordon snarled, snapping another ten off the roll. "What else can I do?"

"Aw," Kellerman said, "don't take it like that." He was cheerful once again. After the door shut behind him, Gordon could hear his dry whistle trailing off down the stairs.

Some weeks later, Gordon took Lockjaw, their bull terrier, for a night stroll in the park. Pam had gone to Washington Irving to enroll in still another adult course. He became aware of a man watching him, certain that his interest was more than casual.

Sure enough, the man approached him, and started talking in a hurried, stumbling way.

"Hold it, hold it," Gordon said. "I don't understand a word."

The man flushed, and then said, slowly, "I'd like to talk to you about Ed Kellerman."

Hearing the name on a stranger's lips hit Gordon like an ice cube rolling down his back. He studied the man's pale, youngish face, noted his puffy eyes and narrow white lips. It was a face molded by anxiety.



"I don't know anybody named Kellerman," Gordon said.

"Maybe we'd better sit down and talk. That's a nice dog you have there."

They found a vacant bench, and the man said his name was Dave Bliss. He knew Gordon's name, too, and where he lived, and the fact that he had a wife and two kids. And Kellerman.

"I won't ask you what he's got on you," Dave Bliss said, pushing a cigarette in and out of his mouth. "I figure you'll do as much for me. Only would you mind telling me how much you pay him? He hits me for fifty a month."

"Same," Gordon said hoarsely. "Used to be forty, up to a little while ago."

"Yeah," Bliss said. "That was when I decided to follow Kellerman around and see what I could learn about him. I don't know about you, but I work for the Post Office; that fifty bucks hurts."

"I'm a salesman," Gordon said. "Commissions only, no salary. Some months I starve."

"And who knows, once Kellerman starts getting greedy?"

"So you followed him? What did you learn?"

Lockjaw started to bark at nothing, and Gordon cuffed him on the nose.

"I learned he's got a big clien-

tele," Bliss smiled. "I followed him to maybe ten, fifteen addresses all around the city. He doesn't carry anything, it's all in his lousy head, all the names and places."

"So we're not alone," Gordon grunted.

"No," Bliss said. "That's the important point. We're not alone. That's why my idea is so good. A piece of filth like Kellerman, he doesn't deserve to live. Forget the money, just think what he *does* to people. I'm turning rotten inside."

"So?" Gordon said.

The man threw away his cigarette. Lockjaw sniffed the lighted butt, and Bliss pulled the dog away, patting his grizzled head.

"We're going to kill him," he said. "That's what the idea is."

"Are you crazy? Murder's worse than blackmail."

"Murder's the wrong word. We're going to erase a human mistake, that's all."

"Forget it," Gordon said. "Put it out of your mind. I'll make believe I never heard you say it."

Bliss lit another cigarette, and looked more relaxed. "Everyone was squeamish at first. But when I explained things, they came around."

"What do you mean, everybody?"

"The people on Kellerman's list. I've seen a dozen of them; you're

one of the last. When I told them how easy it would be, how fool-proof and everything, they said okay. You see, this conscience thing doesn't bother you when you remember what Kellerman is. The only thing that's important is not getting caught. My idea takes care of that."

"That's what all criminals think," Gordon said.

"This isn't a crime," Bliss went on. "And nobody will get caught because it won't even be murder. It'll be an accident. If anybody gets into trouble, it'll be me. Just me. I'm going to kill Kellerman with my car, when he's making the rounds one night. I have the time and place all figured out—just before midnight, on Carol Street."

"I see," Gordon commented. "An accident."

"Right," Bliss said. "Now you know the favor I'm doing you."

"You think the police are a lot of dopes? You've been reading the wrong books. Murderers get caught, didn't you know? Even if they call it an accident."

"This is different," Bliss said, "because of the witnesses."

"What?"

"I'm going to have witnesses," Bliss said. "A lot of them, all disinterested parties. Nothing to connect 'em with each other, no axe to grind. And they'll all tell exactly

the same story, what they saw, how it was all Kellerman's fault, getting hit by my car."

Gordon got up. "Don't tell me any more," he said. "You've told me too much already."

"No," Bliss argued. "You've got to understand, you're a part of this like everybody else. Don't you see the beauty of it? Safety in numbers. Reliable citizens, all testifying the same way. I mean *reliable*. You ought to see who some of Kellerman's victims are. One is a college professor, two are doctors. There are four housewives, a bartender, a couple of businessmen, some working stiff like me. They're all in with me, Brinton, every one of them."

"So many witnesses to one accident?"

"No, we won't need everybody. Some of them won't be asked any questions by the cops, but they'll all be there, just in case. We want you there, too, Brinton."

"You're really nuts," Gordon said. "You and the rest of them. I won't have any part of it. I hate Kellerman's guts, but that doesn't mean I'll kill him."

"I told you—"

"Murder is murder," Gordon said bluntly. "However, maybe there is something in getting together. Maybe if we all went to the police, they'd figure some way to

deal very adequately with him."

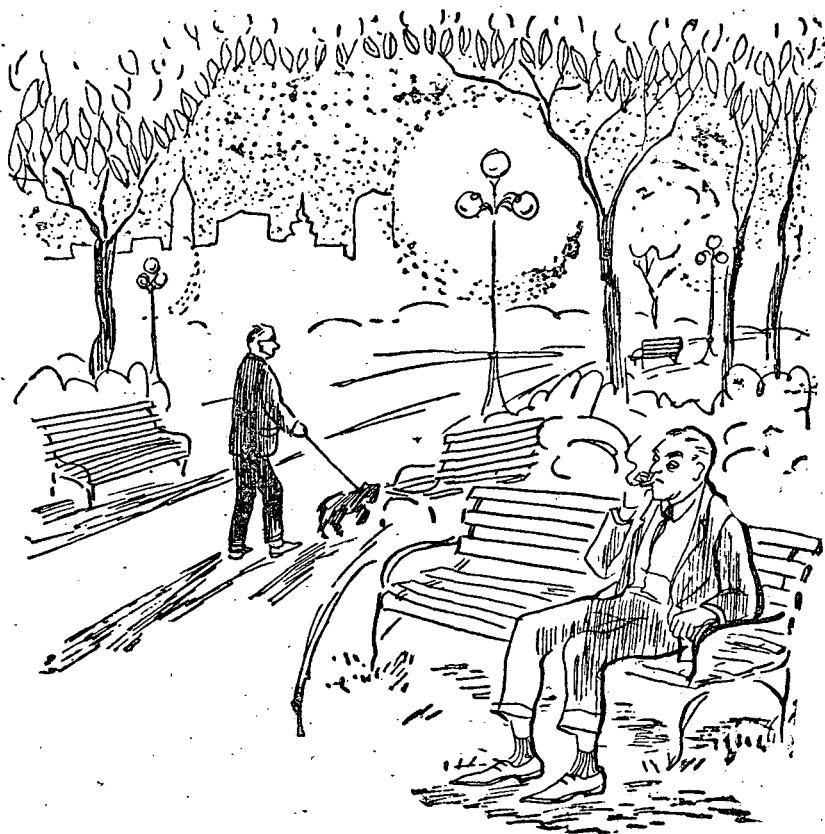
"And have Kellerman spill about —what he knows? No thanks, pal. My way is better."

"Your way stinks," Gordon said. "I'm telling you not to do it." Gordon grabbed Lockjaw's leash. "Come on, you dumb beast. Let's get going." He started to walk away.

"Brinton," Bliss said from the bench. "What if we do?"

But Gordon kept on going. Only the dog looked back.

Thursday night, the telephone rang. Pat took it, and had trouble distinguishing the caller's name. Finally, she shrugged and told Gordon, "It's somebody for you, Debliss, I think he said."



"I'll take it in the bedroom," Gordon said.

Dave Bliss said, "Hello, Brinton, remember me?"

"Yes, I remember you."

"You going to be busy tomorrow night?"

"What do you mean, busy?"

"A few of the gang are getting together tomorrow night. Corner of Carol Street and Ninth Avenue, around eleven-thirty. How about coming down? You might see something interesting."

Gordon said tightly, "You can't go through with it."

"We're all in this together," Bliss said. "You might not even have to do a thing. But safety in numbers, you know?"

"Nobody ever gets away with a thing like that. Take my word for it."

"We're okay if we stick together," Bliss said. "All of us."

"Not me," Gordon said angrily. "Not ever!" He hung up, hard, to make the point stick.

Collection day was Saturday, but Kellerman's icy whistle wasn't heard in the hall. Gordon began to pace the livingroom carpet. Why didn't Kellerman come? Gordon wondered if he already knew the answer. His hand was on the fifty dollars in his pocket, the bills were getting damp and soft.

When evening came, he heard a footstep on the stairs and knew it was Pat, returning from the opening of an art gallery. He hoped—or did he?—that she'd remembered to pick up a newspaper at the subway exit. Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't.

"Hello, darling," she said. "Kids give you any trouble?"

"The usual warfare," Gordon said. "Did you remember the paper?" She had.

"Mommy!" said an anguished voice from the bedroom. "Susie kicked my doll and wounded it!"

Gordon found the item on an inside page:

#### MAN STRUCK BY CAR, KILLED

*"A man identified as Edward Kellerman, 61, of 18-11 Sudworth Street, Queens, was struck and killed by an automobile on the corner of Carol Street and Ninth Avenue at midnight. The driver of the car, David Bliss of Manhattan, was released after questioning. Four witnesses on the scene testified that Kellerman had stepped into the automobile's path as it rounded the corner."*

Gordon felt an odd, dull emotion, not joy. Why he shouldn't rejoice at the death of a man he despised was something he couldn't analyze. He clipped the news story and stuffed it into a drawer.

He didn't look at it for a week, but it was all he thought about. Eventually, he knew it was necessary to see Dave Bliss again.

He found the name in the telephone directory. Bliss was reluctant at first, but said he would meet him in a couple of days. The rendezvous he named was a bar, *Yank's*, on Twelfth Street.

*Yank's* turned out to be a family-type establishment near the waterfront. You could see the red and blue stack of some passenger liner over the roofs of the buildings.

Bliss was waiting outside the bar for him, zipping and unzipping his windbreaker. He looked a lot better than he had the night of their first meeting. Calmer.

It wasn't quite seven o'clock. Only three or four people were in the place. Gordon and Bliss took stools at the end of the counter, and the bartender provided them with a couple of beers. When he walked away, Bliss said, "I guess you read the paper, right?"

"Yes," Gordon said. "I read it."

"It's a relief, huh? No more pay-off days. It's like a raise in pay," Bliss smiled. "I've been paying that guy so long, that fifty is like found money in my pocket."

Gordon said, "Those four witnesses the paper mentioned, were they all—"

"Sure," Bliss interrupted. "Didn't

I tell you how foolproof it was? The cops only questioned four, but there were plenty of others standing by."

"Smart," Gordon said. "You're all very smart."

"Sure. You can't argue with so many witnesses. I told you how easy it would be."

"And what if one of them talks?"

"Nobody will talk. There's no reason to talk."

"They've got consciences, haven't they?"

"Did Kellerman have a conscience?"

"Kellerman wasn't a murderer."

"He was worse. Worse!"

"You think there's safety in numbers," Gordon said. "There could be danger in numbers, too. The more people know about this—"

"We did the world a favor!" Bliss said gratingly. "Don't you understand?"

"No! You killed a man! That's all I understand! I'd never sleep another night if I had *that* on my mind."

"Listen, pal, if you've got any ideas—"

"Don't worry, I've got them! I've been thinking of nothing else all week."

"You're out of your head! We did you a good turn, we saved your dough, your health! You'd

turn every one of us in for *that?*"

"I didn't want your help!" Gordon said, his hands shaking so much he had to clench them in his lap. "I never asked you to commit murder for me! And I can't forget it, not that easy!"

"You dope," Bliss groaned. "Oh, you stupid jerk," he said sadly. "Hey, Yank!" he called to the bartender. "Let's have another beer."

The bartender came to the end of the counter with a towel draped over his hairy arm. He looked at Bliss and said, "Trouble?"

"Yeah," Bliss said. "All we can handle."

Gordon watched the nose of the .45 appear like a conjurer's trick from under the towel. He looked swiftly into the bartender's face and saw the terrible purpose. Then the muzzle of the gun was against his chest. Gordon brought up both hands to push it away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bliss jump from the stool, and then the gun went off, its roar so loud it drowned out even his last dying thought.

The cop asked, "How'd it hap-

pen, Yank? How'd he get it?"

"Geez, ask them," the bartender said. "Frank, you mind if I have a shot? I'm still shook up."

"Go ahead," the cop said. "And what's your name, mister?"

"Walton. I'm with the phone company."

"And you're Mrs. what?"

"Chester," the housewife answered.

"And I'm Dr. Adams," the old man said. "Dr. Herbert Adams. I'm with Polyclinic."

"He was sitting right next to me," Dave Bliss said. "I jumped ten feet when he pulled that gun."

"Holdup," the bartender said. "That's what it was. I didn't even think what I was doing. I just grabbed the gun and wrestled him for it. Then it went off."

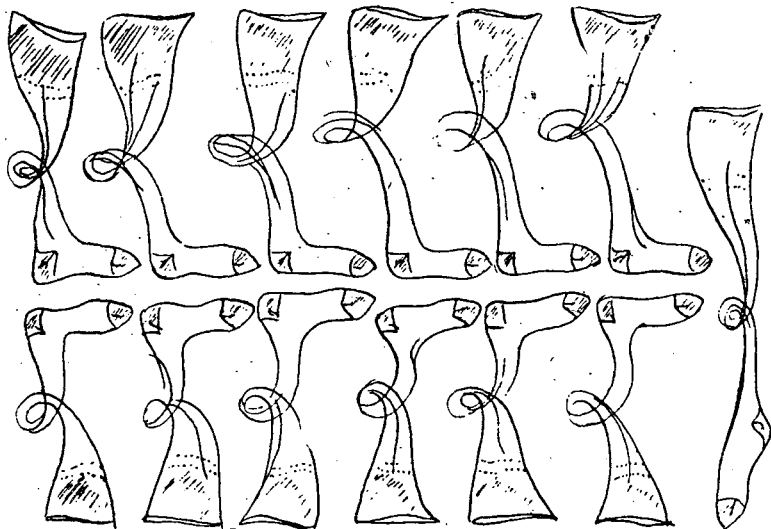
"That's how it happened," Walton added.

"Yes, that's right," Dr. Adams continued, and the others nodded.

The police removed the body within the hour, and after a little while, they let the witnesses leave the scene of the tragedy, to go their separate ways.



*A calculated risk is not invariably as open and shut as an elevator; a grievous oversight may put one's back to an obdurate wall.*



# UNCALCULATED RISK

by Dick Ellis

**D**ETECTIVE Corsi glanced up from the report he was typing and noticed a man standing just inside the squadroom door. He was looking around with bright interest. His glance met Corsi's and he came forward.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully. He set a bulky leather brief-

case on Corsi's desk. "This is the detective bureau, isn't it? The policeman downstairs told me—"

"That's right," Corsi said.

"My name is Prentiss, John Al-



bert Prentiss. I'd like to see the officer in charge."

Corsi eyed the man, not much more than a kid, actually, with a fresh haircut, clean shave, snub nose and good teeth, and wearing slacks and an open-necked sport-shirt. He looked like he might just have come from a college classroom, carrying his books in the bulging briefcase.

Corsi smiled. "Maybe I can help you."

"It's more of a vice versa proposition." Prentiss frowned. "You look vaguely familiar."

"My name's Dave Corsi. What do—"

"Of course," Prentiss said. "You've been in the papers a lot, one of the men working on the Strangler case."

Corsi stopped smiling. "What is it you want?"

"I'm him," Prentiss said. "The Strangler."

There were three other detectives in the squadroom just then. They turned to look at Prentiss. One man laughed, "Oh, no. Not another one."

Corsi sighed. "I see. You're the Strangler. You killed all twelve of those women, I suppose?"

"Thirteen," Prentiss said. "The last one just this morning, about nine o'clock; about an hour ago. There had to be thirteen, you see."

"Naturally," Corsi agreed. "Look, fellow—"

At this moment the squad commander, Captain Baines, tramped in from the corridor. He noticed the grinning men watching Corsi—who wasn't grinning—and the kid.

"What's the gag?" Captain Baines rumbled.

"Another Strangler."

"Oh, no," the captain sighed.

Prentiss looked around quizzically. Then his face cleared. "You guys think I'm one of these neurotics that get their kicks from confessing to murders they didn't really commit. Believe me, I'm not. The proof is right here." He patted the scuffed leather briefcase. He snapped it open, reached inside.

"Hope he ain't got a bomb in there," someone muttered.

"No, no," Prentiss laughed. "At least not literally."

He brought out a manila envelope. Opening it, he dumped a heap of women's nylon stockings on the desk. The squadroom was abruptly silent.

Captain Baines came over. He poked at the hose with a large, blunt forefinger. While the others watched, he silently counted the stockings. He said, "Thirteen."

"Right," Prentiss said cheerfully. "You'll have the mates of twelve of them on file here. The last one

you'll find knotted around the scrawny neck of a Miss Denman in her apartment at 718 Commerce Street."

Baines gave Corsi a nod. The detective picked up his phone, got the precinct that included Commerce Street, and asked them to send a car around to the address given by John Albert Prentiss.

"That's more like it," Prentiss said. He started to reach again into the briefcase, but the captain's big hand grabbed his wrist, and he found himself looking into the muzzle of a pistol that had suddenly appeared in Detective Corsi's hand. He gave a yelp. "Take it easy! You guys nuts?"

"More than likely," Baines rumbled, "but put your hands on top of your head and freeze."

"I just wanted to show you the pictures," Prentiss said. The detectives gathered around him. A man frisked him and said, "He's clean."

Corsi put his gun back into its holster on his belt.

"What the heck, I'm not a gangster," Prentiss grumbled.

The captain gingerly picked up the briefcase and shook out the contents onto the desk. There were two thick loose-leaf notebooks, a Polaroid camera, and a packet of small white envelopes, held together by a rubber band. That was all.

Baines leaned over, read the neat-

ly handwritten inscription on the top envelope: "Mrs. Jane Kimmons, nine-thirty a.m., May fifth."

"She was the first one," Prentiss said. "I have them arranged in order. I took a Polaroid snapshot of each one of them, see, just after I finished her off, so there wouldn't be any slightest doubt that I'm the Strangler." He beamed proudly around at the grim-faced detectives.

The captain slipped the rubber band off the envelopes. He opened the flap of the top one, slid out a photograph, stared at it. "Good night!" he breathed.

Craning his neck, Corsi saw that it was a picture of a middle-aged woman lying on her back on a sofa. She was obviously dead, and just as obviously she'd been strangled. The nylon stocking knotted around her throat was clearly visible. So was a square of cardboard propped on the dead woman's chest. On it, printed in large block letters, were the words: "John Albert Prentiss. Number 1."

Corsi quickly looked away. His face was white. He was trembling as he fumbled out a cigarette and lit it.

Even Captain Baines appeared to be shaken, for the first time in years. By now he had all the envelopes open. The pictures inside them were similar to the first: a

dead woman with a stocking knotted around her neck; the same sign on her chest, with only the number changed—2, 3, and to the last one, 13.

"I left the sign on her," Prentiss told them. "I won't have any more use for it now."

"No," Captain Baines said grimly, "you sure won't."

The phone on Corsi's desk rang. He picked it up. "Central detective squad. Yeah." He listened a minute, then said, "Okay. Be back to you in a few minutes." He slowly replaced the phone on its cradle.

"Was she there?" a man asked.

"She was there—sign and all," Corsi said.

"Heck, it was easy," Prentiss was saying, ten minutes later. He was lounging in a chair in the captain's office, smoking a cigarette in eager puffs. The captain was behind his desk while the other men stood along the wall near the door that opened into the squadroom.

Word had got around the headquarters building that the Strangler had been nailed, or rather had nailed himself, and everyone who could had crowded into the squadroom, peering into the captain's office, trying to get a look at the man who had been the object of the most intensive manhunt in the city's history.

Prentiss seemed to enjoy the au-

dience, although he glanced now and again toward the door, as if waiting for someone he particularly wanted to see.

"Everybody—the cops, the public—all looking for some kind of a psycho, see," Prentiss explained. He laughed, showing his large white teeth. "A Jack the Ripper, sneaking around in the middle of the night—all that jazz." He paused, lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of his last one.

"Sure," Captain Baines said. "But you're not a psycho, are you? You're perfectly sane and normal."

Prentiss winked at him. "Sane enough to lead you guys a merry chase for almost six months. You never even got close to me. But normal? Hardly, Captain, hardly. The fact is, my IQ borders on the genius level. Check with the University. You'll find my grades are way above average."

There was a general stir. Someone swore softly.

Baines lifted a hand for silence. Then he said, "Uh huh. We already have. You're a smart fella, all right; a senior at the university, majoring in journalism. The people there think very highly of you—as a student, at least."

Prentiss scowled briefly. "Those clods. Who cares about them? Always after you to join some juvenile club or fraternity, to fit into

the group. Who the hell wants to fit into the group? To be another sheep in the flock—"

"Of course," Captain Baines said soothingly. "You're above all that."

"You bet I am," Prentiss declared. He grinned. "If you're thinking I'm panoranoic, you're quite right. So was Napoleon."

Again he craned around toward the door, turned back irritably when the captain asked, "How did you do it? With all the warnings in the newspapers, day after day, how did you get these women to let you inside their apartments?"

Prentiss glanced toward the stenographer seated over in the corner beyond the captain's desk. "You getting all this down? Yes? Okay . . ." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "How'd I do it? Look at me, Captain. What would you think if you opened your door bright and early some morning—not at nighttime, mind you, but in the morning—and you saw me in the hall with a boyish smile on my face, and a briefcase in my hand? You'd think here's a kid trying to sell something, magazine subscriptions, maybe. Right?"

No one answered.

"Right," Prentiss said. "Maybe you'd give me a fast brush-off, but it'd never enter your head that here was the famous Strangler, that ravening, bloodthirsty monster

you'd been reading about in the papers."

A girl standing in the doorway, a secretary from the traffic bureau down the hall, giggled nervously. "He's right. He's kind of cute."

Prentiss glanced toward her, back to the captain. "See what I mean? No problem about getting into the dame's apartment, especially since I picked them in advance."

"We'd noticed there was something of a pattern," the captain said, dryly. "Middle-aged or elderly women, living alone in small apartments, in modest neighborhoods where—"

"And all worthless," Prentiss said. He grimaced. "Alcoholics, dope addicts, prostitutes—no good to anybody. Heck, I did them a favor, putting them out of their misery."

Detective Corsi, standing directly behind the prisoner, doubled his fists. "You lousy son of—"

"Take it easy," Baines snapped. "Not that we don't all agree with you. Of all the perverted bums I've had in this office, you're the worst, Prentiss."

Prentiss laughed with nervous delight. "Anyway, you're convinced I'm the Strangler? No possible doubt left in your mind? The stockings I brought with me match those you had on file?"

"Yes, yes," Baines growled. "You

heard the report I got from the crime lab a few minutes ago. You're IT. But why? Why did you murder thirteen helpless women, who had never done you any possible harm?"

"You might ask me what my own mother was like, how she treated me when I was a helpless child," Prentiss laughed, "but don't bother. Actually, my mother was a fluttery little woman who spoiled me rotten." Once again he glanced toward the open door.

"Who are you expecting?" Baines asked.

"The reporters, of course. Where the heck are the reporters? I want to get things rolling."

"What—things?"

Prentiss leaned forward, placed his hand on the two thick notebooks that had been brought in and placed on the captain's desk, along with the other evidence. He patted the books lovingly. "You know what these are?" he asked.

Baines stared, frowning. "They seem to be some kind of manuscript."

"Now you're getting there. This is the real reason I strangled those women, Captain. Sure, they were useless, anyhow; but they served my purpose very well, and now I'm going to return the favor by making them all immortal."

The silence hung thick in the

crowded office for a long moment. Then someone gasped. Someone else cursed. Prentiss turned his head, looking eagerly from face to face. His gaze locked with Detective Corsi's.

"You mean you did all this, just so you could write a book about it?" Corsi asked harshly.

"Not just a book—a masterpiece!" Prentiss cried. "Don't any of you understand? I'm a writer—a good writer. Why should I struggle for twenty or thirty years, hacking away on some newspaper, and trying to sell my work on the side to clods who wouldn't know true literature if it came up and kicked them in the pants?"

He lunged to his feet, waving his arms excitedly. Corsi shoved him back down into the chair. He wasn't gentle about it. Prentiss didn't seem to notice.

"Why go through all that hell," Prentiss continued, "when I can have it all right now? In a week, I'll be the most famous author in the country—in the world. It's all there in my book—violence, sex, suspense, how I did it and why I did it—everything; and all of it true, with pictures." Suddenly he stopped, and made an obvious effort to calm down.

Captain Baines looked even sicker than before. "And you tell us you're sane," he said.

"You bet I'm sane, by any legal definition of the term," Prentiss said. "You won't find any psychiatrists in the country who will say differently in court. No, you're not about to shove me into some nut-house, Captain, not by a long shot. I'll stand trial—"

"And be convicted of first-degree murder."

"Certainly I will. Why do you think I gave you all the evidence you could possibly need? I'll be convicted and sent to prison."

"That's what you want?"

Prentiss laughed. With steady hands he lit a fresh cigarette. "It's all part of my plan, Captain. There's no death penalty in this state. I'll get life imprisonment, naturally. No, the only risk was that by some accident I'd be caught before I finished my work—got all thirteen."

"Why thirteen?"

"You've heard of a 'baker's dozen'? Of course. Well, the title of my book is *Murderer's Dozen*. You see? So there had to be thirteen murders. And I did it. I did it!"

Baines shook his head wonderingly. "You did it, all right. I hope you enjoy all this success while you're sitting out your life behind bars."

"Want to bet?" Prentiss snorted. "You know as well as I do what a 'life' sentence really means. In ten

years, at the outside, I'll be eligible for parole. I calculate that the very most I'll have to serve is fifteen years, and what's that? I'm twenty-two. Even if I served twenty years, I'd still come out a relatively young man. But I won't. Wait and see. Within a month there'll be good citizens organizing 'Free John Prentiss' clubs. When the serial version appears in a magazine—that alone ought to bring in a hundred grand—and then the movie version, I'll be the biggest national hero since—"

"Shut up," the captain roared. He doubled a fist, smashed it down on his desk. "Shut your filthy mouth."

Prentiss chuckled softly. "Okay. But you know I'm right. I'm taking a calculated risk, but the odds are a million to one in my favor."

"Get him out of here. Corsi, take him down to the jail and book him in."

"Let's go," Corsi snapped.

Prentiss got up. He stretched. "See you in court, folks."

The crowd parted in the squad-room, making an aisle along which Corsi took the prisoner. The corridor outside was alive with newspaper reporters. Flashbulbs popped endlessly, and the din of shouted questions pounded and echoed from the concrete walls. Grimly, Corsi shouldered through the mob,

dragging Prentiss along behind him.

A microphone on a boom pushed out to dangle in front of Prentiss. A man wearing earphones yelled hysterically, "What about it? You really the Strangler?"

"Yes! Yes!" Prentiss shouted into the microphone. "But I couldn't help it. Something drove me to it—"

A woman reporter, tears of excitement streaming from her eyes, pushed in. "Did they beat you? Did they force you to confess? Poor boy!"

Prentiss gave her a brave smile.

Somehow Corsi got him to the self-service elevator, and inside, and slid the door shut in the screaming faces.

The silence was deafening. Corsi punched the button and the elevator started slowly downward toward the basement jail. Prentiss leaned against the metal wall and whooped.

"You see it? You see it? That's just the start. I'll make a million bucks out of this one book."

Corsi gave him a bleak look. "And all it took was strangling a

bunch of worthless women. Did you ever stop to think that maybe at least one of them had somebody who cared?"

"I don't get you. They were just a bunch of old bags."

"Sure," Corsi nodded. "But maybe one of them had a son who still cared for her, even if she was a lush and wouldn't let anyone help her."

Prentiss was blinking rapidly at the detective. "Wait a minute. I didn't see your picture in the newspapers—"

"No, you saw it in my mother's apartment."

For the second time that day, Prentiss stared into the muzzle of Corsi's gun. He tried to shove himself back through the elevator's steel wall. "You can't—"

"Only one person in the world—Captain Baines—knows that my mother was one of the women you killed, and I doubt if he'll tell anybody. Ever."

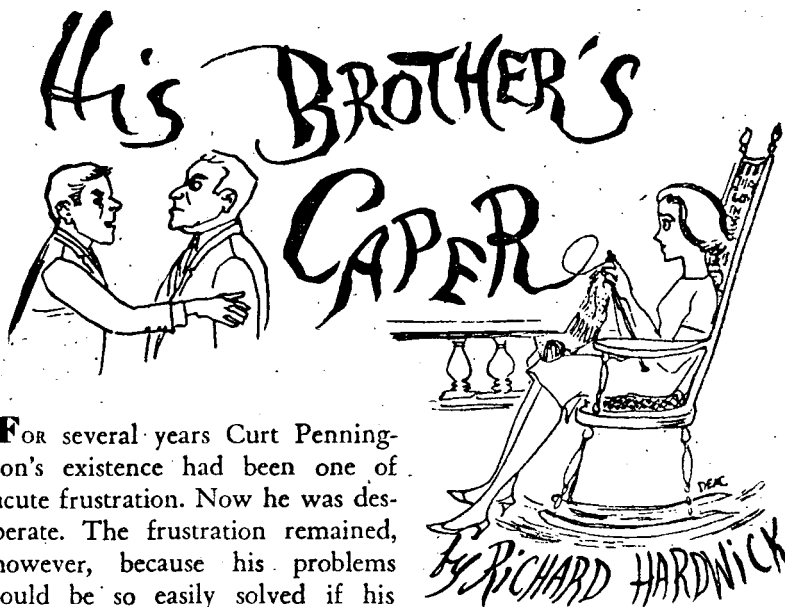
Prentiss screamed, "You can't get away with this!"

"Call it—a calculated risk," Corsi said, and pulled the trigger.





*It is commonly believed that white shall not neutralize black yet, under certain conditions, a scene may blur into a misty gray.*



**F**OR several years Curt Pennington's existence had been one of acute frustration. Now he was desperate. The frustration remained, however, because his problems could be so easily solved if his brother Ethan would only bend a little.

But there was no chance of this happening, so Curt went again to his sister for stop-gap aid. He found Norma in her usual place, the east veranda of the stately old Pennington home. He pulled a wicker rocker alongside hers and sat down.

"Sis . . ." he began hesitantly. "Sis, I need a couple of hundred

to tide me over. I was wondering if you could let me have it. I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

Norma Pennington lowered her knitting to her lap and looked at Curt. She was thirty-one years old, two years younger than Curt himself, yet she treated him as though he were a child. In some ways, Curt was exactly that. Physically, he was a tall, handsome young

man, but even now he wore the petulant expression of a six-year-old who has been denied an ice cream cone. The analogy extended, for Curt's ice cream cones were such things as Benjie Nix, the gambler, who would take no more of Curt's bets until he squared some of the money he owed, and Curt with a red hot tip on the second at Jamaica. Another was Charlene Norrell, who did not consider any free form of entertainment as being entertainment at all. There were other things—new clothes, a hi-fi, a sports car, a trip to Las Vegas. No indeed, the best things in life to Curt Pennington were definitely not free.

"You haven't been gambling again, have you, brother?" Norma asked reproachfully. "You know what Ethan says about that."

"To heck with Ethan!" He hiked his chair a bit closer. "Can you let me have the two hundred, sis? I swear I'll pay you back! When this nag comes in I'll be in high cotton—" He had not meant to let that slip, and he tried to amend it. "Actually, I won't be betting the money. My bookie's putting the pressure on me and I've got to get up some money today or—" He let it trail off ominously, trying to gauge Norma's reaction from the corner of his eye.

"Or what?" she asked stiffly.

He shook his head. "I'd rather not spell it out for you, sis," he said gravely. "Anyhow, it's really Ethan's fault. He knows I can't possibly get along on an allowance of fifty a week."

"It's really for your own good, brother. Ethan is only thinking of your best interest."

"Really?" he said archly. "And I suppose he was really thinking of your best interest when he ran Charlie O'Toole off."

A flicker of pain crossed Norma's plain features and a tear formed in each eye and dribbled down her pale cheeks. Quickly, Curt reached out and took her hand.

"I'm sorry, sis. That was a rotten thing to say." But no matter what Norma had convinced herself lay behind Ethan's summary dismissal of the only serious suitor she ever had, to Curt it was arrant snobbery. The O'Tooles, even if Charlie was an up-and-coming criminal lawyer, were simply not the kind of people the Penningtons were, and the result was that poor Norma sat by the hour on the veranda or in the garden knitting sweaters and socks instead of little things for little O'Tooles.

The incident had characterized Ethan Pennington, to whom the name of Pennington was virtually

a fetish. Individual Penningtons were expendable, existing only in relation to what they might add to or detract from the family name. There were no outstanding Penningtons now, the last having been the paternal grandfather, who had accumulated considerable wealth and had firmly established the family as top drawer in Carl County and the town of Carlsburg. There had, unfortunately, been a number of Penningtons at the other end of the scale over the years, with the penchant for waste and high living. Ethan had taken it upon himself to keep this sort of activity down and to keep the family escutcheon unsullied.

The eldest child of Traver and Elise Pennington, Ethan, at the age of forty-one had gone so far as to have his own father committed to an institution when it appeared that the old man's excesses were imperiling both the Pennington fortune and name. In the ten years since that, Ethan, as sole trustee, had assumed the helm of the good ship Pennington, and had steered it circumspectly through the reefs and shoals of life.

There were just the three of them in the immediate family now—Norma, Curt, and Ethan. Curt was the incipient black sheep. Norma, in her initial shock over the O'Toole affair, had come perilous-

ly close to swaying over to Curt's point of view, but the constant reminders of family duty and responsibility put forth by Ethan eventually cemented her to her rocker and knitting.

"Perhaps you should do as Ethan says," Norma went on, "and take a position in town. Then you would have money to do the things you want." It was as if she were sitting on Ethan's knee having the words spoken for her.

"I've tried to explain to you, sis," Curt said, "that I have absolutely nothing against work, per se. What I cannot understand is why I should take some lousy job with a bank or a brokerage when Ethan is sitting on a pile of money that rightfully is as much mine as anybody's!"

"The money mightn't be there at all but for Ethan," Norma reminded him.

Curt nodded his head. "I know all about that. But when Ethan had us sign those commitment papers, you have to admit he made it sound a lot different than it really was. And when he got his hands on everything, his very first move was to put you and me on a lousy fifty dollar a week allowance."

"I get along very well on mine."

"But you don't do anything but

sit here!" He was on his feet, waving his arms. "There's a world out there, Norma! A world that's alive and vibrant, full of lights, places to see, things to do, and that Ethan—"

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" The French doors pushed open and a paunchy, well-dressed man stepped out onto the veranda and riveted Curt with a pale green eye.

"Yes, you did! Father used to give me a thousand a month, and you said I'd get even more if I went along with you and had him put in a . . . what was it you called it? . . . a rest home!"

Ethan Pennington's heavy lips twisted in a momentary smile. "I hope you learned a business lesson from that, Curt. A verbal contract carries no weight."

"I thought of it as your word, not a contract."

"As eldest heir and trustee of the estate, it is my duty to protect the assets and conserve the income. You live here without cost, and it seems to me fifty dollars a week is ample pocket money. Perhaps," he added with pointed emphasis, "more than adequate. Eventually it may take a reduction to wean you away from your bad habits."

"What you consider my bad habits," Curt put in peevishly, "I con-

sider—well, my personal hobbies."

"Hobbies?" Ethan said, his eyebrows rising. "What a quaint euphemism for gambling, drinking, carousing, and running around with loose women! I often wonder if the name Pennington means anything at all to you."

"It would mean a lot more if I could sign it at the bottom of a check!"

"Made out to that gambler, Benjie Nix?" Ethan suggested. "Or to that Norrell woman? I don't want to hear anything more on the subject!"

He turned on his heel and stalked back into the house. Curt stared after him, his jaw clenching impotently, then he sat down again and leaned toward Norma. "How about it, sis? Just two hundred, I swear you'll get it back."

Charlene Norrell was a contemporary of Norma Pennington's, but there the similarity ended. Charlene was tall, sultry, and exceptionally well put together. She ran a little dress shop called the *Bon Ton* located on Main Street in Carlsburg next door to a cocktail lounge, the *Pump Room*. When she closed her shop at six that afternoon, Charlene stepped next door and sat at a dark corner table where Curt Pennington had been sitting morosely since mid-

afternoon awaiting her arrival.

"No luck with Ethan, huh?" she said.

He shook his head. "Norma let me have a couple of hundred. I gave Benjie half of it on account, and got the other hundred down just in time to hear my nag come in a poor last."

The bartender brought Charlene's regular drink, a champagne cocktail, to the table and placed it before her. She took a sip and patted Curt's hand. "That's too bad, honey. There's a swinging bunch going up to the mountains this weekend. The snow's still good, I hear. Skiing ought to be great."

Curt had been gazing down into his half-filled glass of beer as though he might find there some harbinger of good tidings. Now he looked up at Charlene. "Are you going?"

"Sure I am, baby! You know how I love the mountains."

"Eddie taking you?"

She nodded. "I wish it were you, Curt. I really do. But without any money, well—the lodge and the food and drinks and everything—"

"Yeah, I know."

"I don't know why you put up with that tightwad brother of yours. I really don't."

"What choice have I got?"

She took another sip of her champagne and after a moment

said, "I've been thinking about some of the things you've told me about him. It seems to me you could put the bite on him without him getting wise."

He bent his head, frowning. "How?"

"Well, suppose you told him you were in some kind of big trouble, that you had to have ten grand to square it. You said he's a nut about keeping the family clear of scandal."

He sighed. "No dice. I've thought of that myself. Ethan saw right through it. He wanted proof, and that was that."

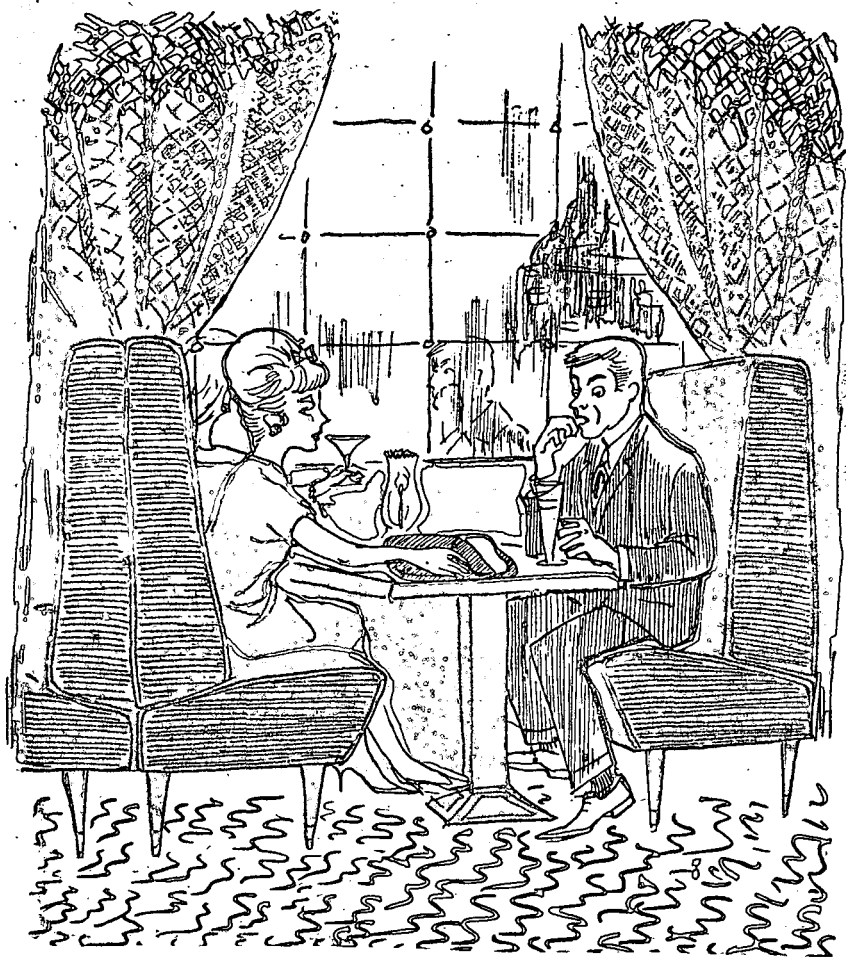
Charlene pushed her glass aside and leaned toward him, lowering her voice. "Then show him proof." She paused long enough to take a surreptitious glance around the room. "I'll blackmail you. It's that simple."

Curt rubbed his chin uncertainly. This was a new angle. "It would have to be very convincing. Ethan may be a snobbish ass, but he's no fool."

"We'll make it more than just convincing, we'll make it real."

"Real? But I haven't done anything you could blackmail me for."

Charlene finished off her champagne cocktail. "Then *do* something! Honestly, Curt, there are times when you are terribly dense."



"Now, look, Charlene, you don't expect me to go out and— and kill somebody, or rob a bank or something—"

"Of course not, silly! This would be just between the two of us. For instance, there's no secret

around town that you always need money, that Ethan won't give you enough to get by on. So, just suppose you stole some checks and forged a signature on them?"

"Whose checks?"

"Do I have to spell out every-

thing for you?" she said impatiently. "I doubt if it would seem strange to Ethan that you were able to get your hands on the *Bon Ton* checkbook, would it? You could also steal some of my canceled checks and copy my signature. I could find out about it, and tell Ethan it would cost ten thousand to keep you from being prosecuted and, more important to him, to keep the Pennington name from being dragged through the courts in a forgery trial."

Curt had always been vaguely aware that Charlene was not simply good to look at, that beneath that chic coiffure there dwelled a genuine brain, and now he was certain of it. "You know," he grabbed up his glass and finished off the beer, "it just might work, at that!"

She smiled and stood up. "I'm going to the powder room, honey." With red-nailed fingers she pushed her purse across the table. "It just happens that my checkbook is in here, also this month's bank statement with my cancelled checks."

She walked away, swaying prettily, and disappeared through the door marked *Ladies*. Curt stared at the bag for a moment, then let his gaze wander about the room. The bartender was facing the other way, washing some glasses, and

people at other tables were engrossed in conversation. He reached out slowly, snapped open the purse and dipped his hand inside. He took several checks from the back of the checkbook, and the cancelled check with which Charlene had paid her last month's electric bill, and tucked it all into his inside coat pocket.

"Petel!" he called to the bartender. "Bring Charlene another cocktail, and switch me over to Scotch."

Ethan stood sternly at the high windows of his study, hands clasped so tightly behind him that the knuckles were white, and stared blindly out at the sun drenched garden. "Alright, Curt, let's go over it again in detail, and so help me, if you're trying to put something over on me I'll—"

"I swear I'm not!" Curt stood in the center of the somber, book-lined room, arms stiffly at his side as an errant pupil might stand in the headmaster's presence. "I just didn't think Charlene would do this."

"Then you did forge the check and cash it?"

"Yes."

Ethan sighed and turned slowly until his eyes locked on those of his brother. "You cashed it at this . . . this honky-tonk?"

"The *Pump Room*. Pete knows me. He didn't question the check then, but he showed it to Charlene when she got back from a weekend trip. Well, she paid him for it and came to me. She said it would cost ten thousand to keep me out of prison for forgery." He threw his hands out. "I never thought she'd do this. I knew she'd get sore when she found out, but—" He could see very clearly in Ethan's face that his brother was not thinking as far ahead as prison, but only as far as the trial, the newspapers, and the notoriety.

"Curt," he said, "how could you get into something like this!"

"I kept telling you I needed more money. I was in a real tight spot. You wouldn't listen to me, and some gamblers were beginning to get nasty about some money I owed them, so—"

Ethan's sigh was both tremulous and exasperated as he faced around again to the window. After a long silent interval he said, "Tell the Norrell woman I want to see her."

"Charlene?" Somehow he had not expected this. "You want to see Charlene?"

"Her name *is* Norrell, you idiot!" Ethan bellowed. "Pick up the telephone and call her right now! Tell her—" He raised his

arm and looked at his watch. "Tell her to be here in an hour, at one o'clock sharp!" He spun around once more, his eyes blazing with anger. "I'd rather you weren't here, Curt. I'd rather handle it without your help."

"But she's blackmailing *me*," Curt said. "She might think something's fishy if I tell her you want to see her."

"Do as I say. Call her."

"You don't know her, Ethan."

Ethan's arm came up and the forefinger quivered toward the telephone. "*Now!*"

"She's very high tempered—"

The finger began to shake violently, and Curt stepped quickly to the desk and snatched up the phone.

It was half past one by the clock behind the bar. Charlene had been with Ethan for thirty minutes now, and Curt nervously poured the rest of his second beer from the bottle into the glass, wondering what was happening out at the house.

"Want another one?" Pete inquired, swishing his bar rag lethargically.

"Not yet." He tried to focus his attention again on the racing form lying on the bar.

Pete put the rag aside and tapped the page with a blunt fin-



ger. "That nag right there, now there's one to keep your eye on. Anybody with a few bucks in his jeans would do well to lay it right on the nose in the third tomorrow."

"Bay Rum?"

"That's the nag, Bay Rum."

"That's a sucker bet," said a small, thin character who eased onto the stool beside Curt. The bartender made a disgruntled noise and moved away. The little man slapped Curt on the back.

"Hiya, boy!"

"Hi, Benjie."

"So this is where you get your hot tips, from a glass jockey?"

Curt shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

The little gambler chuckled. "You know something, Curt? If you had enough dough, I could retire in two years."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you're the best sucker in my book. I like you, boy! I really like you!"

Curt glanced up again at the clock. Quarter till two. What was taking so long, he wondered. "You say Bay Rum is a sucker bet, Benjie? Why not prove it by letting me ride for twenty-five?"

"To win?"

Curt nodded. "Right on the nose."

Benjie cut his eyes around furtively, then took a little notebook from his pocket and made a notation. "You're on." He slipped the book back into the pocket. "Oh yeah, Curt. There's a big crap game set for next week. Think you might be able to round up some dough?"

The phone rang behind the bar and Pete answered it. He motioned to Curt. "It's for you. You here?"

It would be Charlene—or Ethan. He nodded quickly and moved down to the end of the bar and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Curt!" It was Ethan. "Get home right away!"

"What's the matter?"

"Never mind that! You just get here!" The phone at the other end slammed down.

Through the study window beyond Ethan, Curt could see Norma strolling aimlessly in the garden, and even in his own agitation he felt a pang of regret for his sister.

"I simply do not understand how you, a Pennington, could become involved with a woman like that!"

"What happened?" Curt asked.

"What happened! She merely doubled her outrageous demand,

that's all! She sat right there at my own desk, grinning like the cat that ate the canary, and told *me*, Ethan Pennington," he seemed to swell at the sound of his own name, "that I would pay her twenty thousand dollars within three days or she would take the check to the county solicitor!"

"I tried to explain to you, Ethan," Curt said. "The trouble with you is you never listen to anybody."

"Well, I won't pay it!"

Curt scuffed at the carpet. "I don't blame you. I deserve the worst. Throw me to the wolves. I'm no good, Ethan, we both know that."

"There you go thinking only of yourself again! You are a Pennington!"

"Yes," Curt nodded repentently. "I am a Pennington."

"Maybe I should have listened to you. Do you think there may be a chance you could get that—that woman to agree to the original figure?"

It was the first time in memory that Ethan had admitted he might have erred, or that Curt, of all people, might be able to do something to rectify it. "I'll try, Ethan." He straightened and with a serious expression, placed his right hand over his heart. "For the good name of Pennington."

Out in the garden he saw Norma lean to sniff an early rose, after which she sighed heavily and opened her knitting bag.

"You should have seen him! Practically foaming at the mouth!" Curt doubled over the table with laughter. He was sitting in a dark booth in a roadhouse several miles outside of Carlsburg so they would not be seen together.

"It doesn't strike me as being particularly funny," Charlene said calmly. "In fact, it was the reaction I expected. I've got him over a barrel and he knows it. He's the type to foam at the mouth when there's nothing else that can be done."

Curt's laughter subsided, became a smile, grew uneasy, and faded. "You—you meant to say *we've* got him over a barrel, didn't you?"

She had begun to buff her nails, and she gave a little shrug. "Look at the facts, then tell me what you think I meant."

He stared at her in the semi-darkness, his mouth hanging open. He saw a new side to her, that she was not only smart, and good looking—in a hard sort of way—but she was completely perfidious.

"Then you planned it this way,

did you?" he said, the flat sound of his own voice seeming to characterize his stupidity. "You're really going to blackmail Ethan? You're going to cut me out?"

"Certainly I'm not going to cut you out, sweetie!" she said, as if offended by the suggestion. She examined her nails carefully, even though they were scarcely visible in the gloom. "Of course, you won't get quite as much."

"How much?" he broke in, straining to control himself.

"Five thousand."

"Five? While you get fifteen? What if I go to Ethan and confess the whole thing?"

"What good would that do, baby? I do have the check, you know. And you did forge it. It would just be your word against mine as to how it happened."

Curt's mouth moved silently, like that of a fish suddenly plucked from its environment and deposited on land. "But you and I agreed—"

He broke off then, remembering some recent words of his brother's, doled out with an appropriate smirk, having to do with the worthlessness of verbal contracts.

"You'll get your five thousand," she said. "Now then, you go back to big brother and tell him the talking is over. Tell him it's pay

up or—" She smiled sadly and reached across the table to pat his hand.

This was a bit strong, he thought. Even Ethan might balk at twenty thousand. No—no, he wouldn't. He would probably cough up more than that if he saw a nasty scandal looming.

Curt went back to the house and told Ethan the price could not be changed. As he expected, the news merely served to put Ethan into a towering rage.

After a period of storming up and down the study, while Curt stood respectfully to one side, Ethan came to a halt in the center of the room. "It's obvious," he said in a strained voice. There was a peculiar look about him, a sort of simmering deep in his eyes, that Curt had never seen before.

"What's obvious?"

"That this woman will not stop at this. This will go on, *ad infinitum*." He looked at his younger brother, a strange grin on his face. "Curt, there is only one thing to do about this."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Curt replied uneasily. The whole thing had started so simply, so utterly ordinary, the way two follows one, or C follows B. It had gotten badly sidetracked somewhere along the line. All Curt had wanted was a taste of the

life to which he considered himself entitled. He did not like that gleam in Ethan's eye; he did not like it at all.

"Then listen carefully," Ethan went on, somewhat in the manner of Norma when she was quietly chastising him, and explaining a one syllable words. "This Charlene Norrell fully intends to make her living out of this stupid mistake of yours. Our only alternative is to make her life a short one."

It took a moment to sink in, and then Curt took a step backwards and put his hands palm out toward his brother. "Wait a minute! You're not suggesting we *kill* Charlene, are you?"

Ethan shook his head. "I'm not suggesting that *we* do anything of the sort. I'm suggesting that *you* do it. After all, it was your stupidity that got us into this blackmail situation."

It was like an echo, in reverse, of what Charlene had said. The whole business was like a little snowball rolling down a long snow-covered slope, getting bigger and bigger all the time. Curt had never in his wildest dreams imagined it would come to this. "I—I couldn't kill anybody, Ethan."

"A Pennington does not say he cannot do something."

"But *murder*?" Even as he brought the word itself out into

the open, it seemed to lose some of its harshness. Charlene had, after all, double-crossed him in the most despicable way. Whatever she got, she would deserve.

"Look at it as self defense, Curt," Ethan said. "This woman is threatening us all. She is threatening the Penningtons!"

It was Curt's turn to pace the room, which he did for several minutes. Then he stopped, tightened his lips, and looking his brother in the eye, nodded. "You're right, Ethan. We can't have that, can we?" Through the window, in the lazy sunshine of the garden, he saw Norma sitting and reading a book. "It isn't as though it were for my sake alone, but for yours and Norma's as well, isn't it?"

Ethan smiled paternally. "I hoped you'd see it that way, brother. Now then, shall we get down to details?"

"By all means."

"Good. I'd say the best way to do it would be to shoot her."

"That sounds reasonable. Charlene lives outside town in a sort of remote area where the neighbors are far enough away so that a shot mightn't be heard."

"Of course, you'll need a gun."

"Naturally," Curt said. "I seem to remember that father had a revolver. Whatever happened to it?"

"I keep it in my safe there," Ethan replied, rubbing his chin. "But I wonder if it would be wise, using that one."

"It wouldn't be nearly as wise to go out and buy one, and then have Charlene turn up shot the next day."

"I suppose you're right," Ethan admitted. He went around the desk to the safe, glanced over his shoulder to be certain Curt was far enough away so as to be unable to read the numbers, then twirled the dial. He removed a revolver and a box of shells and closed the safe. "You'd better try shooting it before you—well, before. It's been a long time since it was fired."

Curt nodded, took the pistol and slipped it into his waistband. "What if there's a slipup, Ethan? Suppose the police suspect me? A murderer would be a worse blot on the family name than a forger. Shouldn't I arrange some kind of alibi?"

"Why? What could go wrong?"

"I don't know. But just in case something does."

"Well, alright." He thought for a moment. "When do you want to do it?"

"Tonight's as good as any, I suppose."

"Then I'll be here in my study all night. If you need to explain

your whereabouts, I'll say that you were with me, that we were going over some family business. How does that sound?"

Curt scratched his head. "I guess it's okay."

"Then it's all-set?"

"I think I ought to have the money, Ethan. Suppose she's hidden the check someplace and I can't get it? I may have to pay her off this time."

A look of sudden suspicion darkened Ethan's features. "I don't know about that."

"It's my neck, brother. They give people the electric chair for murder, you know."

"But twenty thousand—"

"We could put it back in the bank tomorrow."

Finally, Ethan came around. "Alright. You wait here. I'll drive into town and get the money."

Curt went into town himself later. He had half a dozen beers at the Pump Room, talked to Benjie Nix for a time, and then he phoned Charlene and told her that Ethan was getting up the money.

"He wants me to bring it out to your house tonight. Does eleven o'clock suit you?"

"Any time you say, honey. And Curt, why don't you pick up a bottle of champagne on your way? We can celebrate."

"Sure thing." He touched the pistol under his coat. "See you to-night."

Norma Pennington was in the garden knitting a sweater for Curt when she saw the car pull up in the drive. She did not know the young man at the wheel, but she knew old Tom Coggins, who sat beside him. Tom had been police chief in Carlsburg as far back as she could remember.

He climbed out of the car and came toward her. "Morning, Miss Norma," he said, touching his cap. "Ethan home?"

"Is—is something wrong, Chief Coggins?"

He removed the cap and touched his brow with his handkerchief. "Afraid so. Charlene Norrell got herself murdered last night."

"Charlene!"

"I'd like to have a word with Ethan, if I might."

"I—I'll tell him you're here." She backed away, then turned and ran into the house.

Ethan was in the study poring over a sheaf of papers when she burst into the room. "The police, brother!" she gasped. "That—that woman friend of Curt's—she's been killed!"

Ethan rose slowly. "Where are they?"

"Who? Where are who?"

"The police, you nincompoop!"

She pointed vaguely. "Outside, in the garden. Chief Coggins and another one."

"And where is Curt?"

"Still asleep, I imagine. I heard him come in about four-thirty this morning. I—I think he'd been drinking."

"No doubt. Go get him. Tell him to come here at once. I'll go out and speak to the chief."

The door opened and Coggins and the younger officer entered. "I took the liberty of coming in, Ethan," the chief said.

Ethan was obviously annoyed, but he merely nodded. "Go on and get Curt, Norma," he said.

The police chief scratched his neck uncertainly. "She tell you what we're here about?"

"Something about the Norrell woman being killed. I suppose you know that Curt wasn't the only man she ran around with."

"Someone mention my name?" Curt came into the study wearing a robe and a bleary-eyed expression.

"You needn't say anything," Ethan said. He turned to the chief. "Curt and I worked all night right here in this room, from nine o'clock until just an hour or so ago. He—"

"I'm afraid that won't do,

Ethan," the chief said. He held his hand out toward the officer, who took a revolver from his pocket and gave it to the chief. "We found this gun outside her house. Looks like the killer might have dropped it. It's registered to your father, Traver Pennington, but he's been put away—I mean, he's been in a hospital for the past ten years, hasn't he?"

"That's the gun you keep in the safe, Ethan!" Norma exclaimed.

"You keep out of this, sister!" he snapped. He frowned at the chief. "I stick by what I said. My brother and I were here, in this very room, all night."

Curt grinned crookedly and shook his head. "Wish I could go along with that, Ethan, but I'm afraid I can't. Seems the chief picked me up last night about two o'clock."

"That's right," Coggins put in. "We raided a big crap game at Benjie Nix's place and Curt was one of the boys we hauled in. They'd all been there since about eight. The medical examiner says

Charlene was killed some time around midnight."

"The money," the young cop whispered to the chief.

"Yeah. Ethan, did you draw a pretty sizable sum of money out of the bank yesterday?"

Ethan puffed up. "What the devil are you getting at?"

"Can anybody vouch for your whereabouts last night about an hour before and after midnight?"

"My whereabouts?"

The chief shrugged. "Your gun, the money—maybe she was trying to blackmail you, Ethan."

Curt stepped forward and positioned himself between the policeman and his brother. "We Penningtons stick together, Chief Coggins. I know Ethan's rights, even if he doesn't. He doesn't have to answer these questions without benefit of counsel." He turned to his brother and smiled bravely. "Chin up, Ethan. I'll get you the best lawyer money can buy!"

Then, seeing Norma cowering near the doorway, he thought this might be a very good case for Charlie O'Toole.

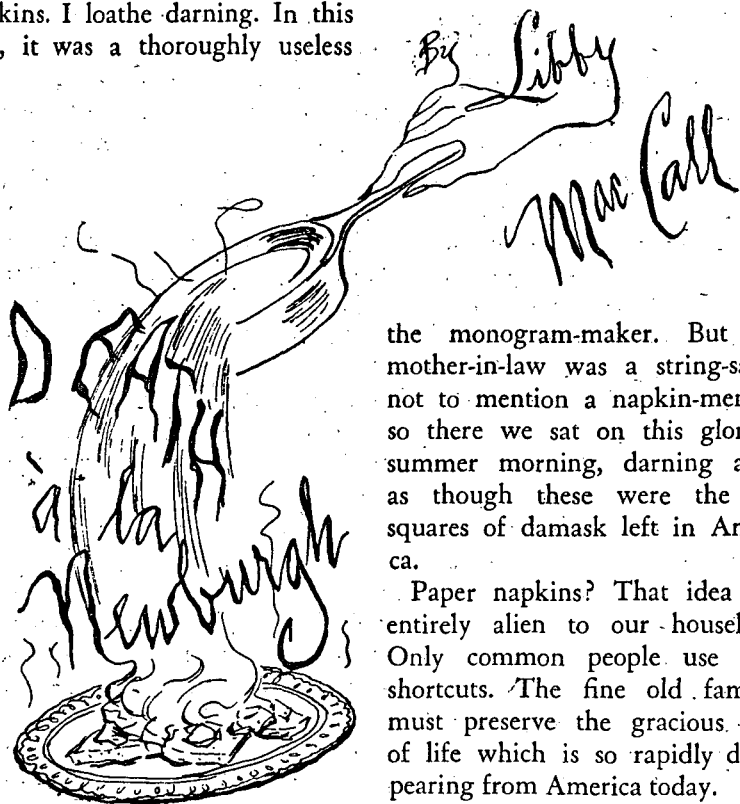


*A candidate for personal freedom may gain his objective only to learn each victory procreates a new challenge.*

I KNOW exactly when the idea first occurred to me.

One morning my mother-in-law and I were sitting at the dining room table, darning damask table napkins. I loathe darning. In this case, it was a thoroughly useless

occupation, because the attic is full of napkins from her trousseau that have never been removed from the pink tissue paper in which they were delivered from



the monogram-maker. But my mother-in-law was a string-saver, not to mention a napkin-mender, so there we sat on this glorious summer morning, darning away as though these were the last squares of damask left in America.

Paper napkins? That idea was entirely alien to our household. Only common people use such shortcuts. The fine old families must preserve the gracious way of life which is so rapidly disappearing from America today.

In order to prevent another dis-



quisition on this subject, one to which I had listened for years *ad nauseam*, I had switched on the radio for the ten o'clock news.

"We bring you an announcement of urgent importance," said the newscaster. I wondered, with the frivolity that was viewed with such contempt in our gracious but humorless home, whether the men from Mars had finally landed. But no, it was nothing of that kind. "A defective shipment of tuna fish has been delivered to many stores in the metropolitan area. Several proven cases of botulism, some fatal, have resulted. All merchandise still on the shelves has been returned to the canner. However, some cans have already been sold. We urge all housewives to check their stocks of canned goods immediately for cans of tuna fish bearing the brand label Ocean Wave. Defective cans are imprinted with the serial number W357. Return the fish to the store where it was purchased and you will receive a refund. We repeat, do not use cans of Ocean Wave tuna, serial number W357."

What a nuisance! I always buy Ocean Wave brand; it's much the best. Now I'll have to go check all the serial numbers. I must have a dozen cans of the stuff.

"Dorothy," said my mother-in-

law, in her well-modulated voice, "is it possible that some of those poisoned cans might be reposing on our pantry shelves? I suggest you go at once to investigate."

I gladly seized the opportunity to escape from the darning and went out to the kitchen, where Willimae, the incumbent of the moment (they changed frequently) was polishing silver. Sure enough, I found three of the four cans on the shelf bore the incriminating number.

"These will have to go back to the supermarket, Willimae," I said. "You'd better look at home and be sure you don't have any." I told her what I had just learned.

"I never buy that kind," she replied. "It's too expensive. Here, I'll give you a bag to put them in."

I dropped the three cans into the paper bag and started back through the swinging door to the dining room. It was then that the unthinkable idea entered my hitherto innocent mind.

Suppose, just suppose, I hadn't heard that broadcast. Suppose one of us had happened to eat that tuna fish. What a shattering thought! And then I took that one further step. Suppose my mother-in-law had been the only one to eat it. How many times, when she went out for her daily drive, I had imagined the acci-

dent that might take place. In my fantasies, she had fallen down-stairs, suffered a heart attack, contracted a virulent infection. But never before had it occurred to me that I might be the active agent. Now, here in my hand I held the means to dispatch my enemy.

I had shocked myself. I didn't realize I could be so cold-blooded. It was one thing to dream dreams of how wonderful life might be without her presence; it was quite another to take a positive role in removing her from the scene. No, it was utterly inconceivable that I, Dorothy Jamison, a decent, God-fearing woman, could ever—Unthinkable! Nonetheless, I did not return the three cans of tuna fish to the shop. Instead, I removed the labels and wrapped the cans in a lacy nylon gown. I had once purchased in one of my brief moments of madness. I had never suffered a recurrence of the particular impulse, and so had never worn the gown. There lay the unlabeled cans, enfolded in mint-green nylon lace, in the back of my drawer. It gave me a sensation of power to know they were there. Naturally, I hadn't the slightest intention of doing anything further about them. One day, I'd tidy the drawer, shake

my head over my temporary aberration, and throw them into the garbage can. It pleased me to think that, if she knew about it, Mrs. Jamison would be highly indignant at the waste of the dollar-nineteen I had forfeited by my failure to return the spoiled fish.

People who knew Mrs. Jamison casually would have been at a loss to understand why I should feel anything but the greatest admiration for her. I myself, when I first met her, had thought her a beautiful and charming lady. It was at a concert of organ music, presented to raise funds for missionary work in Africa, that we were introduced by the aunt I was visiting during Thanksgiving vacation, because I couldn't afford the fare for the trip home from college.

"May I present my niece, Dorothy Hunt-Morrison. Mrs. Randolph Jamison, Dorothy, my dear."

(Auntie's voice indicated that I was being granted a rare privilege. Mrs. Jamison wore a smart hat atop a stylish and becoming hairdo. Her complexion was a tribute to some very talented facial expert. She had obviously been a beauty as a young girl, and was sparing no expense to remain one as long as possible.

We talked of the concert, then



of my college, and eventually Auntie managed to mention—most casually, of course, and in a very well-bred manner—that my mother, her sister, had contrived to marry one of THE Hunt-Morrison's. She did not bother to add that poor old Daddy was still an

assistant professor in a third-rate college.

Mrs. Randolph Jamison invited us to dinner the following evening. She said that her son, Randolph Jamison the Fourth, was also at home for the Thanksgiving holiday. I accepted the invita-

tion with alacrity. Future holidays would be greatly enlivened by the addition of a date. Besides, judging by his mother, this boy could easily be a thing of beauty.

He wasn't. He took after his father, whose picture hung in the drawingroom. That's what Mrs. Jamison called it: the drawingroom. And if he wasn't handsome at least he was tall, moderately presentable, and very intelligent. The two ladies gossiped about the minister, the organist, the menu for the next church supper. They made it painfully obvious that we were being given a clear field to conduct a tete-a-tete.

Randolph Jamison the Fourth seemed to me to be rather awkward and lacking in poise for a young man of his obvious advantages, probably the result of his having been brought up in a fatherless household, I decided. I learned that he liked to read, and hoped to travel abroad next summer. When I called him "Randy" he lowered his voice and said earnestly that nicknames upset his mother. Everyone addressed him as Randolph.

"Even the guys at school?" I asked.

He just smiled and began to talk about a paper he was writing on the philosophy of Santayana. It was a long time before I learned

that the guys at school didn't bother to call him anything at all.

The story of our courtship and subsequent marriage is soon told. Mrs. Jamison apparently decided I was the pretty, sweet, well-mannered, and—presumably docile daughter-in-law she wanted. And, of course, I was a Hunt-Morrison. Auntie had always been enormously impressed by the Jamison wealth and prestige. A few days after my graduation I was married, in the same church where I had first met Mrs. Jamison. Auntie gave me my wedding. Daddy was certainly in no position to stage the kind of show that would have pleased Mrs. Jamison. Randolph and I were too busy with final exams and planning our honeymoon abroad to care, so we let them arrange things to suit themselves.

Our European trip was perfect. Paris was everything we had expected. We spent many delightful hours debating our respective tastes in art. Randolph tended to prefer the old masters, while I championed the moderns, especially Picasso. It was my contention that he only needed to become more familiar with the new painters in order to love them as I did. We did visit the Louvre, but spent most of our time at the Modern Museum. Since I'd had several ex-

cellent Fine Arts courses at college, I was able to point out to Randolph how one should look at a modern painting.

We were very happy. We hated to have the trip end, but we couldn't remain perpetual honeymooners. Randolph was to go into the family business, and I would learn to be a housewife.

Mrs. Jamison met us at the dock. Our room was all ready for us, she said. She listened with the greatest interest to our accounts of all that we had seen and done. I felt like a princess in a fairy tale. After all the years of making-do and doing-without, it was marvelous to be living in this large, beautiful house, with nothing demanded of me except to behave like a lady. But I soon tired of being a guest, and began to talk about looking for a small place of our own.

"But, how ridiculous!" said Randolph's mother, with her girlish tinkle of laughter. Originally, I had thought that silvery giggle quite charming. It was beginning to annoy me. After all, she could scarcely be considered a girl any more.

"Why should you bother with a pokey little house, when there is all this room here? And you know nothing of housekeeping, Dorothy, my dear. Stay at least

until I have taught you the rudiments of cooking and how to manage servants. Randolph is accustomed to being very comfortable. I feel certain he would prefer to remain here until you become proficient."

I looked at Randolph, waiting for him to say he'd be glad to put up with my newlywed burnt biscuits for the sake of the privacy and fun we'd enjoyed in Paris and Florence. He didn't say it. He avoided my eyes. Later, when we were alone in our room, I suggested we'd better begin house hunting tomorrow.

"Mother's probably right," he said. "It would be better to stay here until you learn to keep house."

He seemed different, diminished, when with his mother, but I couldn't very well tell him that. If he himself didn't feel the subtle difference in our relationship, well then, I'd learn to keep house in a hurry, that was all.

I learned. Gradually, the dealings with cook and painter, the preparation of meals on cook's night out, devolved upon me. Once or twice I invited another young couple to dine with us, but the evenings were not a success. I couldn't very well tell Mrs. Jamison she wasn't welcome at dinner at her own table in her own

home, but her presence did not encourage youthful gaiety. I pointed this fact out to Randolph.

"It's time I went to see Hunter & Connolly. A small house will do. Is there any particular section of town that you'd prefer?"

Randolph gave me an apprehensive look. "I'm afraid Mother's grown used to having us here. She'll probably be very upset."

"Nonsense! After all, we're not moving out of town. We'll see her often."

About two weeks later, Hunter & Connolly showed me a nice little bungalow. At dinner, I described it. Mrs. Jamison produced a delicate handkerchief and began to weep, very discreetly, taking care not to smear her carefully applied cosmetics.

"I had thought you were so happy here," she said.

"Why we are, Mother, we are," Randolph said.

"Then why do you want to leave me?"

I tried to explain why a young couple should live by themselves, especially during the first few years of marriage. Mrs. Jamison continued to weep. That's a Victorian verb, I know, but I can't help it. She didn't cry or sob. She wept, gracefully, to an accompaniment of gentle dabbings with the lacy handkerchief.

"It isn't as if I ever interfered."

"Oh no, Mother, of course not. You'd never do that."

"Really, I cannot bear the thought of being all alone in this great house."

Randolph succumbed to her act. He ended by assuring her we would give up the idea of buying the bungalow on Elm Street. When we had retired for the night, I tried a little act of my own, but it didn't work. I was an amateur and no match for Mrs. Jamison. I couldn't weep. I cried, and my nose and eyes grew red.

I gave in, for the moment. At any rate, I decided to redecorate our bedroom to suit our own tastes, since we were to be here for some time. It was quite charming when I had finished. The lovely little Picasso drawings I had acquired so inexpensively in Paris were the perfect final touch. Randolph continued to prefer his old masters, but I felt certain the constant exposure would eventually convert him. And I consoled myself with the thought that it wouldn't be for long. Surely, when a baby arrived, Mrs. Jamison would soon tire of being awakened at night. But no baby arrived. I suggested adoption. My mother-in-law was horrified.

"How can you possibly suggest giving an adopted child the Jamison

name?" she said. "How can you?"

That night I really staged a scene for Randolph. "Can't you see that she's living our lives for us?" I screamed. "We have to get out of here. I'd rather live in a slum, if only I could have you all to myself."

Poor Randolph, pulled in two directions by the two women he loved; but I lost every round. My mother-in-law had too long a headstart and was much too skillful at playing on his feelings. I began to picture her as a monster in disguise. I spent hours dreaming about what I'd do when at last she died, but she continued in the best of health.

Then came the announcement about the fish. It amused me to toy with the idea of using it someday. It would have to be very skillfully done, of course. I certainly wouldn't want Randolph or me to get some by mistake. How would I manage it, IF, of course, I should ever decide to do it—which I never would. There would have to be individual portions, and then there was always the possibility they might become mixed on their way from kitchen to dining room. How did people in detective stories manage these things? Murderers? Often they didn't, and the wrong person was killed, thus confusing the detec-

tive. Anyway, the whole thing was ridiculous. I was no murderer.

If it hadn't been for the living-room curtains, I probably would never have done more than think about it. After twenty years, the curtains wore out, and were returned from the cleaner in truly sad shape, with gaping holes. New ones must be purchased. I suggested one of the new fabrics that resisted dust and didn't need to be ironed.

"And perhaps we might try a print for a change. I saw some lovely ones in Hofstetter's window last week."

Mrs. Jamison was aghast. "This room was planned with the aid of a very famous decorator," she reminded me. "I wouldn't think of making any change in his scheme. It would destroy the entire effect."

"I don't believe they make that material any more."

"Well, you must go to all the best shops. I'm sure it is possible to replace the drawingroom curtains with some that will be identical.

I spent a day in the city—a delightful day; four hours at the museum, where they were having a special art exhibit, two hours lunching with an old school

friend. Just before I caught the train back, I stopped at a department store and picked up a swatch of an off-white fiberglass, identical in color with the worn-out curtains.

"See how similar this is," I said, "and how practical. Nobody carries that old-fashioned stuff any more."

Mrs. Jamison gave one hostile glance at my swatch. "It's out of the question. You must try again at other shops."

That did it. After all the patient years, suddenly I'd had it. There had been far more major disagreements, but somehow this unyielding stand on such a small matter as those curtains was the final straw. I determined to get this old woman of the sea off my back. With her out of the way, perhaps I could recover my husband, who had gradually withdrawn into a little world of his own. He had become sweetly remote, never quarreling with me, but rarely speaking unless he needed to ask the whereabouts of his clean shirts. In the evenings, he read. At table, he replied to direct questions, but usually remained aloof from all conversations. Tonight was no exception.

Mrs. Jamison expatiated at some length on the rash which she said had appeared on her back as the

result of the shrimps upon which we had dined the previous evening. Suddenly, I saw my opportunity.

"Yes," I said, "I think you are absolutely right. You ought to avoid eating shrimps from now on. I'll make sure there's something special prepared for you when I plan shrimps for dinner."

The following Thursday evening was Maruska's night out. (Maruska had replaced Willimae, who had departed in a huff, after Mrs. Jamison had criticized the way in which her toilet articles had been dusted.) The only witness to the fish episode had been disposed of—by the victim herself. How ironic!

On Thursday evening, I prepared Shrimp Newburgh for dinner. I used individual ramekins, one for Randolph and one for me. In Mrs. Jamison's dish I placed a serving of tuna fish, covering it with the Newburgh Sauce. There was no possibility of confusing the dishes. The curled-up shrimp could be discerned plainly.

My heart pounded as I bore the dinner to the table.

"How kind of you to remember that I am now unable to eat shrimp." Mrs. Jamison spoke graciously, favoring me with a slight smile and inclination of the head,



just as though I were the housekeeper—unpaid, of course.

I have no idea how I managed to get through the meal, nor what we talked about. All that night I lay awake, wondering how botulism manifested itself. How long would it be before she began to feel ill? Would she be able to call for help? Would she die quickly, or linger for days?

By breakfast time, there had been no sound from Mrs. Jamison's room. I passed her closed door and hurried downstairs to put on the coffee. At the usual hour, I heard Randolph enter the dining room. I came in, coffeepot in hand, in time to see him draw out his mother's chair so she could seat herself. She was wearing her lavender-velvet negligee.

I nearly dropped the coffeepot.

What could have gone wrong? The next time I went to the city, about a week later, I betook myself to the library to see what I could learn about botulism. I hadn't dared look it up in our local library.

"An acute intoxication, manifested by neuromuscular disturbances, following the ingestion of food containing a toxin elaborated by *Clostridium botulinum*," the book said.

Much to my surprise, I learned that the disease does not develop

for eighteen to thirty-six hours after the contaminated food has been eaten. Botulism is often difficult to diagnose, I read, unless more than one person becomes ill from the food. It can take the form of "aspiration pneumonia" due to difficulty in swallowing, and is often incorrectly diagnosed as pneumonia. Botulism is caused by improperly preserved food, but every can or jar in a batch does not necessarily contain the organism.

Now I knew what had happened. My can of tuna did not harbor any of the dear little germs. Did either of the other two? We would see.

I waited six weeks before trying again; no sense in arousing suspicion. For the second time, I prepared a Newburgh Sauce, lacing it liberally with sherry. It was delicious. Both Mrs. Jamison and Randolph complimented me on it. This time I did not lie awake during the night, since I knew it would be hours before any symptoms appeared. Actually, it was closer to two days.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," Mrs. Jamison said, looking up from the book she was reading. "I can't seem to focus my eyes on the print. I think I had better go and lie down."

Mrs. Jamison never got up again. The doctor (I'd been telling her

for years he was incompetent) made out the death certificate, putting "pneumonia" as the cause of death. Everyone in town who was anybody attended the funeral. Randolph and I spent an entire week receiving a stream of callers bearing condolences, before we had a chance to speak to each other in private. At last people returned to their own affairs and left us in peace.

The first night we were alone, I said, "Dear, don't you think it would be a good idea if we went away for a little while? Tell your office you'll be gone for a few weeks. We might go to Paris and have a second honeymoon. Then, when we get back, I'm going to do over the whole house. These rooms need more color. First of all, I intend to get rid of those gloomy old oil paintings. I haven't decided whether I should stick to Picasso and Chagall, or whether some of the new abstractions mightn't be more effective. We can shop around in Paris and see what's available."

"I have already notified the office that I am going away," said Randolph, "but I would prefer to travel

by myself, Dorothy. And I wouldn't plan to do anything to this house, if I were you. I have turned it over to Hunter & Connolly, to be sold. I shall make you a liberal allowance. You can hang any kind of painting you wish on the walls of whatever home you select."

"Randolph!"

I was utterly unable to do more than gasp out his name. Did he suspect what I had done? But how could he have found out? Had he seen those cans in my drawer?

"I'm sorry, but I feel that it's now or never. For years I've dreamed of what I'd do if I were free from Mother's domination. Now that I am, I have no intention of letting it be replaced by that of another woman."

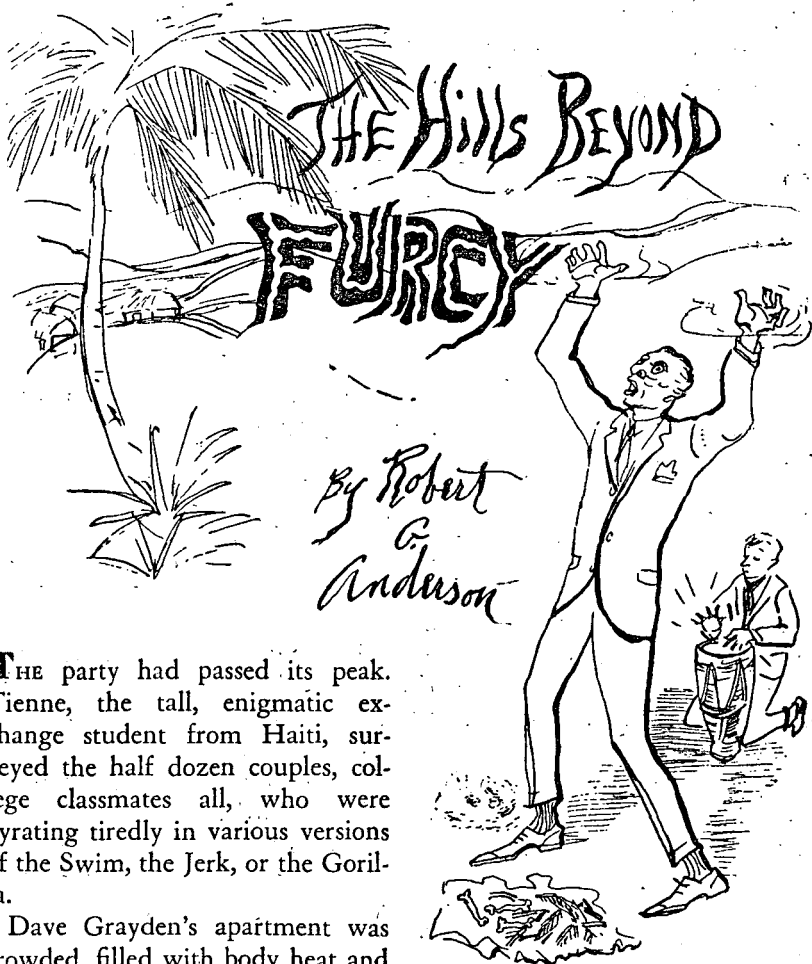
"I only did it for you," I sobbed, "so we could have a life together. I don't want to dominate you, only to be happy with you, as we used to be."

Randolph gave me a long, penetrating look. Then he smiled slightly and handed me his clean handkerchief.

"You ought never to cry, you know. It makes you look most unattractive."



*The cynic may disparage at will, but one who has traveled to "the hills beyond Furcy" will not be dissuaded.*



**T**HE party had passed its peak. Tienne, the tall, enigmatic exchange student from Haiti, surveyed the half dozen couples, college classmates all, who were gyrating tiredly in various versions of the Swim, the Jerk, or the Gorilla.

Dave Grayden's apartment was crowded, filled with body heat and hazy with smoke, a contrast to the

February wind which lashed at the windows. Tienne stood in a darkened alcove, aloof, remote; his intense gaze riveted on Carol Braun—no—Carol Mason, now that she and Roger were married.

The Roger Masons, guests at this informal discotheque, were to leave in two days on a delayed honeymoon to the Caribbean; delayed because of Roger's graduation. But it had been worth waiting for, because even before his graduation in the top ten of his class in chemical engineering, job offers had poured in on him. He finally chose Fraser Oil, which offered an excellent starting salary, plus the chance for rapid advancement. They also had given him a generous bonus for signing, plus a month's grace before reporting for work.

Someone turned the record player down and called out in a thick voice, "Tienne, how about some of your voodoo? You know, that ol' black magic."

A flicker of annoyance darted across the dark, handsome features of the Haitian. He tried to ignore the request, but others took it up; they were tired of dancing.

"Show us some magic; show us some voodoo from Haiti."

The dancing stopped altogether, and the record player turned itself off. The group eyed him expect-

tantly, hoping he'd respond.

Chick Melardi, bold and brash as always, scoffed, "Voodoo! That mumbo-jumbo! Jumping around the place and killing chickens; oh, brother!"

But he was the lone dissenter; the others hooted him down. Chick's words stung Tienne and his lips tightened. The fact that he had one too many of Dave's Specials also made him a little reckless. A wry smile played about his lips. He shrugged and held up a hand.

"All right, what do you want?"

He stepped to the middle of the room, and the couples fell back into a ragged circle. Tienne stood alone, a bold, striking figure in a dark business suit. His eyes held darting yellow lights in their depths, lights which lashed like the tail of a wild thing.

Carol and Roger pressed forward with the rest, and Roger's thoughts went back two years, to when Tienne had first arrived at the university. From the day when he had accidentally dumped a bowl of bean soup into Carol's lap in the crush of a busy cafeteria, they had formed an unusual triumvirate on campus. It was Carol who had taught the Haitian student the intricacies of American slang, and how much catsup and/or mustard was proper on a Campus-Union

hamburger, the real "in" things.

Carol's courses were in the humanities, far removed from the scientific chemical engineering of Roger and Tienne. She told Roger that, surprisingly, Tienne had a remarkable insight into poetry and philosophy. If Roger felt a twinge of jealousy at this, he was comforted by the knowledge that he and Carol would be married just as soon as he graduated. They did get married, and although Tienne knew how it was with them, he continued to gaze at her with his wise, old, young, sad, adoring eyes.

Carol was the target of Tienne's eyes now, as he stood alone, the air charged and electric about him. Carol turned her eyes away.

Impish little Donna Lennart, wobbling and giggling, suggested, "I'll tell you what, Tienne. Get Dave here to shut up, for a starter. He's been bending my ear all evening about his canoe trip in British Columbia last summer; what a bore!"

"Hey, you can't say things like that about your boyfriend. Besides, I've got so much money that everything I say should be fascinating."

There was laughter at this, but Tienne held up a hand again, and the room quieted by stages. His voice was commanding.

"You!" He indicated Morrie Day,

a devotee of the bongos, "Take this beat!" He rapped a staccato series on the edge of a side table. To the others, "Be quiet, and observe."

Morrie carried the pair of bongos from a corner, sat down and clasped them between his knees. Soon the room was pervaded with a sound like the thumping of a wild heart; even the compulsive whisperers were stilled.

From an inside pocket, Tienne took a small package wrapped in what looked like a dirty rag. Carefully he unrolled it and revealed three dried chicken bones, several short, hollow sticks, and a few white feathers. The feathers were dotted with dark blots. Dried blood? The wild drumming subsided to a hum, and Tienne placed the bundle on the floor and began a slow shuffle around it. There was an intense look on his face as he began an unintelligible chant, a curious mixture of French patois and African. Roger caught the word, "Malele," recurring time and again.

Once Tienne stopped his shuffling dance, and squatting, quickly and accurately drew a portrait of a man on the rug by dribbling sand from his fingers. It was a likeness of Dave. As he finished, Tienne drew a final line across the throat of the picture. Then he straightened, resuming his shuffling dance

and chant. The spectators were engulfed in rhythm as his voice rose and fell, the words weaving around the drumbeats. The throbbing grew and Tienne shuffled faster, his lips moving in exhortation. Both he and Morrie were perspiring freely now. Tienne's dark face gleamed. Morrie's features were contorted with his efforts on the drums.

Suddenly, the drumming and chanting stopped as if a door had slammed on it. Tienne sank into a chair. Wearily he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He bent forward and scooped up the white bundle. Gradually his face resumed its impassive mien.

The couples remained as they were, shaken and awed. There was something intangible vibrating in the air about them, retreating now.

Dave, panic in his eyes, gesticulated wildly and tried to talk, but no sound came. And although the buzzing spectators may have thought for a moment that it was a joke, there was no mistaking the fright on Dave's face. Even Donna became concerned. Tienne got up and thrust his hand into his pocket, withdrew some leaves, and crushing them between his fingers, massaged the powdered remains against Dave's throat. Dave burst into a torrent of words.

"I really couldn't talk! Did you think I was kidding? I thought

someone had taken hold of my neck and squeezed." He grabbed Tienne by the lapel. "What did you do to me?"

"Just call it a form of hypnotism," he answered, and shrugged Dave's arm away. For some time Tienne listened to the chorus of "How did you do it?" and "Show me how it's done," but finally, he was able to work free of the press around him. The groups argued heatedly among themselves, forgetting him for the moment. When they looked for him later, he was gone. There were a few more drinks consumed and attempts made to renew the conversation, but the party soon broke up.

Carol sat quietly beside her husband in the taxi going home.

"That was quite a show Tienne put on—a new side to him. What did you make of it?" Roger asked.

"I—I don't know. It was all so bewildering. He has power."

"So did Houdini and Thurston," Roger said lightly.

"Don't laugh; I *felt* this."

"Agh, just sleight of hand, some new wrinkle of an old trick; there's probably a simple scientific explanation. As for Dave, anyone can hypnotize him when he's half stoned."

Should she tell him, Carol asked herself, about the little voice beating insistently against her eardrums

during Tienne's chant. "I love you—I love you—you are mine—you are mine—" like a drumbeat? No! It would only reopen the wound made by that ugly scene only two weeks ago, just a few days after she and Roger were married. Roger had come home tired from his long hours of intensive lab work, to find her and Tienne laughing and listening to her records of little French songs.

"You just can't come here all hours of the day, Tienne, and visit with my wife when I'm not home," Roger had blurted. "We're married, and it's different now. Call it jealousy, but it doesn't look right."

Carol had been crushed, and Tienne retreated into his reserve. Never before had it been necessary for them to weigh their actions so carefully. Roger was tempted to end the strain with a jocular quip but decided it was better to have it understood from the beginning.

"Perhaps you are right," was Tienne's stiff reply. With a short, "I'm sorry, I'll not trouble you again," he left, and they had not seen him until tonight at the party.

As a result of that showdown, Carol and Roger had had their first spat, although it was mostly hurt silence on her part. She was filled with compassion toward Tienne, but she could see Roger's

point, also. But now she could never tell him of the poem—a poem of Tienne's—recited to her in a voice of quiet ardor in the university library:

"In the hills beyond Furcy  
The sky is blue and high,  
And the sea curls beneath our  
feet.

My love will trust me  
With her hand in mine.  
We will soar with the eagles."

And now, married, it was Roger and Carol who would soar with the eagles.

They had their tickets for a cruise of the Caribbean, including several days at Port-au-Prince. At Roger's hesitation at this part of their trip, Carol used her powers of persuasion, searching the depths of his eyes with her own pleading, serious look.

"Please—for friendship's sake—for Tienne's friendship with both of us. Remember how close we all were? He told me a long time ago, a honeymoon in Haiti would be perfect. The fragrance of pine on the heights—the flowering poinsettia plants, tall as a man, blooming scarlet along the roads—I feel I know it. It should be especially beautiful this time of year, and he said the island will cast a magical spell around the heart. Please, for old times' sake?"

To further convince him, Carol

added, "Remember when I moved from the apartment on Beall street and you both helped? Will we ever forget the sight of Tienne walking down the sidewalk with my bright dresses draped over one arm, a dozen books in the other, balancing my orange bed-lamp on his head, with the cord tangling his legs?"

That brought laughter from both of them, and Roger gave in.

They sailed from Miami on a Thursday afternoon. Moving in an unbelievable sun-drenched world, the bright water and soft air beguiling them, they resisted the shipboard activities just to laze and relax on deck. At night the stars in the deep, dark sky winked at them as they stood catching a breeze and watching the phosphorescent wake.

Roger and Carol stepped out onto the dock at Port-au-Prince, into the melee that was Saturday on the Magic Island. At last, Carol thought, the evergreen land that Tienne had praised so gloriously! The waterfront and the city itself teemed with vivid life and color. They went through customs, showed their smallpox vaccination certificates. Roger barely had time to check on their luggage when Carol wanted to know where she could shop for handbags.

"Later," Roger protested. "Later,

we'll have time for that. Let's get to the hotel and freshen up. I could stand a drink of that famous rum, too."

They hailed a taxi and were off down Truman Boulevard to the Grand Seigneur Hotel.

It was eight o'clock. Resting in their rooms at the Grand Seigneur, they felt a delicious weariness after their tour of the city. No broken bones were evident as a result of their careening rides in the local camionettes and taxis, although tomorrow might show a few bruises. Surveying the city and bay from the heights of Petionville, they had descended to the Museum to view the anchor purported to be from Columbus' Santa Maria. At Carol's urging, they had prevailed on their slaphappy, suicide-bent taxi driver to take them to the colorful Iron Market where she had run wild, purchasing a handbag, sandals, a stunning hand-rubbed mahogany jewelry box—and best of all, a complete Haitian girl's costume. It consisted of apricot blouse, green skirt, endless strings of bright beads, and a yellow, mannish straw hat with a broad orange brim.

When Roger had lightly protested, she laughingly waved her hand. "Easy come, easy go. Don't be a Scrooge, darling, this stuff is really marked 'Courtesy of Fraser



Oil'." Then, half dreamily, "Wasn't it wonderful they gave you that fat bonus for signing, and time for this—" She waved out over the city and the sparkling bay.

Roger smiled indulgently. "We're not spending a whole month in Haiti—only four days. There are other places, after all. Besides, you know what Mr. Anker of Fraser Oil said. 'Take the month off for a honeymoon, and here's a bonus. But when you report for work, we're going to start taking our pound of flesh.'"

"Bosh!" She hugged him tight. "They know they hired a genius."

Roger held her close. "We're so lucky. Here we are, the girl from Ohio and the Nebraska boy, honeymooning in Haiti. I can't believe it."

"I know how you feel, darling. I have to remind myself twenty times a day, but won't it be fun telling about this to our grandchildren?"

"Well, come on now, enough of this dreaming. Change, or whatever you are going to do. I'm going down to the bar and have a Barbancourt. That's real rum!"

He paused at the door. "Say, about tonight, let's take in the night life at some of these cabarets. We'll eat at a good restaurant and make the rounds. OK?"

"Fine. Now shoo out of here.

I'll join you in a few minutes, and maybe we can have a snack at the hotel dining room. I'm starved." Later that night, at Buteau's, they sat at a little table in a secluded corner of the terrace which afforded an excellent view. Carol was radiant in blue linen with white accessories. It set off her shining hair and healthy, suntanned skin with casual crispness. As a concession to Carol, youth, and the tropics, Roger wore a flame-red dinner jacket. They ordered langouste 'flambee', the specialty, and found it delicious.

Laughing and talking honeymoon foolishness, they finished their meal and, leaving Buteau's, went on a round of the cabarets. They finally found themselves squeezed into a small club with a minuscule table holding them apart. The insistent drum beat, together with the flash and color of the place, brought home to them the exotic, vibrant life of the island. Carol's eyes were everywhere—so many laughing brown faces. Did everyone look like Tienne?

They ordered drinks, and watched the sinuous dancing of the Haitian girl in the spotlight, a tall, bronze girl in a green and white dress and cerise turban. Her movements were liquid and languorous. She began to chant. The drums sank to a low throbbing, and the

crowd quieted somewhat. At intervals, Roger caught the word "Malele."

"Carol, isn't that the same thing Tienne was saying at Dave Grayden's party, remember?"

"Why yes, it does sound familiar."

Roger looked around. Almost sitting on their laps were a middle-aged couple, tourists from the States like themselves. The man appeared distinguished, prosperous and amused.

"Pardon me," Roger addressed the man, "but can you tell me what she is chanting?"

The man was glad to be friendly; he suggested they push their tiny tables together. He ordered another round of drinks. There were quick introductions.

"Strange that you should ask me," he told them. "Before we took our first trip, Betty and I boned up on Haitian history, and especially voodoo. We've been fascinated by it ever since. In this chant, she is seeking the help of Malele—the turnabout goddess—the capricious one. Malele is also called the 'Old One,' since one of her manifestations is in the guise of an old hag—a gray-haired crone."

"You called her capricious," Carol prompted.

"Yes," the man continued,

"Malele is the only voodoo goddess who can substitute herself for a real human being; then the spirit of the one she replaces is set free. For a favorite houngans, or voodoo priest, she can do this, but he must be powerful. Several times, back in the hills of Haiti, I understand it has been accomplished. But it always ends the same. First the victim, then Malele disappears—when she wishes." He laughed a little self-consciously.

Seeing the grave look on both the young people's faces, the man said, "Come, come, be gay! There's life and color and singing all about us. Don't take all this too much to heart."

Carol's gaiety increased and Roger played along. They plunged headlong into the joyousness of the night. The couple, the Raddisons of St. Louis, stayed with them for a short time, but tired early and left.

In the late hours, they found themselves carried along in the colorful stream of traffic. It had been a hectic evening; their heads still throbbed with the beat of drums. They were bushed.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Roger suggested. "But first we'll get some honest-to-goodness bacon and eggs at the Saint Marc."

Carol nodded, "Then we'll call it a night."

They felt better, a little more clear-headed, after they had eaten, but when they got back to the hotel they went straight to bed, weary but happy.

About an hour later, Roger woke. Aware of the subtle influence of the tropical night, he felt for Carol. She was gone. He got up and went into the next room where a vague luminescence from some far-off light filtered in at the window. Carol was at the mirror, her face serene, as if she were asleep—or drugged. Yet her voice was plaintive as she argued softly with two shadowy figures in the glass. One was a squat, hideous old hag; the other a tall,



handsome male Haitian. Tiennel “Carol!” Roger cried, his voice hoarse.

The images misted, faded away, leaving the mirror blank. Carol lifted an indecisive hand to her forehead and shuddered, wrenching herself free from some bewildering embrace.

“Where—what am I doing here?” She fell into Roger’s arms, sobbing almost soundlessly. “Hold me,” she whispered. “I had a dream about Tienne, and a horrible old woman.”

“I know—I saw them.”

“You saw!”

“Yes, damn him. This is Tienne’s work.”

His voice was angry and frustrated; he patted Carol’s head while many emotions fought within him. Then it hit him. He led her gently to a chair, then crossed over to a lamp and snapped it on. Next, he dragged out all their luggage.

It was in one of her small overnight cases that he found it, wedged cleverly between the blue satin lining and the outer shell, and when he pulled the small white bundle from its hiding place, the chicken bones and hollow sticks fell out and clicked upon themselves as they dropped to the floor. The few dirty white feathers drifted like snowflakes to the rug.

"How did they get in there?" Roger demanded.

Carol was bewildered for a moment, then her eyes widened in remembrance. "It must have been the night before we left! Tienne came over to say goodbye and to wish us luck, he said. I didn't tell you for fear you'd be angry with him. I was packing and was in the room all the time—no! The phone call! It was to the travel agency, and I made it from Clarice's apartment across the hall because ours was disconnected."

"That was it; that was all he needed to put that devilish thing behind the lining of your case. You see what he's doing, don't you? And he's on *his* ground!"

Roger's eyes lit with quick fury, then softened, and he said, "We'll get out of here, first thing in the morning. Hang the rest of this trip! We'll fly back to the good old U.S.A."

Carol nodded dumbly and curled up against him, shivering.

"Let's go back to bed now, get a few hours sleep, anyway," he said. "Things will look different in the morning." Exhausted, they fell into an uneasy sleep, her golden head resting on his out-flung arm.

The air which drifted in at the window was laden with the fra-

grance of jasmine and mimosa. Outside, the tropical night held even the bird peeps in thrall. One, two hours crept by.

Then downstairs, just before dawn, the heavy-lidded night clerk at the desk watched the last straggling revelers. He saw the blond girl cross the lobby. Dressed in Haitian girl costume of sisal shoes, bright apricot blouse, straw hat—strings of beads swinging—she opened the outer door as in a dream, her lovely face expressionless.

She paused a moment outside, then approached the ancient jeep parked at the curb. A proud young Haitian, his mouth wide in a gay smile, stood beside it and held the door for her. She got in.

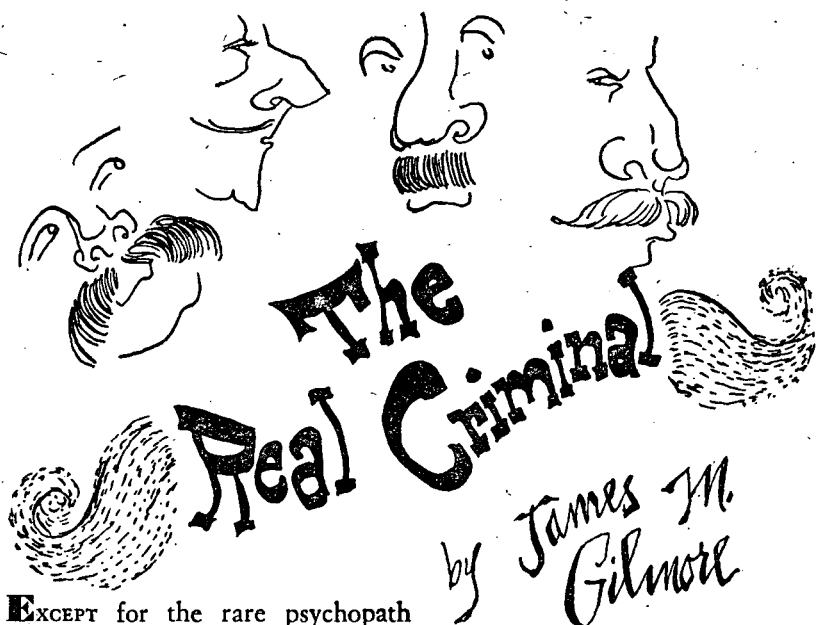
"Where are we going?" she asked tonelessly, not looking at him.

He jumped in beside her, started the motor. Glancing down protectingly he answered, "To the hills beyond Furcy."

The jeep chugged away.

Inside the Grand Seigneur, several floors up, Roger smiled faintly in his sleep, for the pressure of her head on his arm was reassuring. He gave an involuntary hug; nor did the stiff, scraggly gray hairs against his skin disturb his dreams.

*Over-indulgence of a phobia has been known to effect a cure, but the point of saturation invariably is a subject of dispute.*



**E**XCEPT for the rare psychopath who kills for the pure pleasure of killing, and the equally rare professional killer who does it for money, murderers usually aren't the cold-blooded monsters they're cracked up to be.

Most of them are nice, normal, average folk, people like you and me, who ordinarily couldn't swat a fly or run over a cat without feeling a little squeamish.

You find that hard to believe?

Look up the facts in any good book on criminology. You'll discover statistics prove the chances of a murderer ever committing a second murder are something like a million-to-one. Why? Because in many cases the victim was, in fact, the real criminal.

Take the case of George Win-

nard, or "Good old George" as his friends called him, before they heard he shot and killed Ray Barber.

George was everything you'd expect a good-old-George type to be; a ruddy, plump, good-natured man in his late thirties, always ready with a joke and an immense grin. He was absolutely faithful to his lovely, if somewhat flighty, wife, Ruth. His faithfulness, however, didn't stop him from playfully patting secretaries or making harmless passes at waitresses. He was the perfect father to his three sons. At least, he put up with their shaggy dog of undetermined origin, seven rabbits, and three pet turtles. He went to church every Sunday, ushered every fourth Sunday, and never, never fell asleep during the sermon. He worked half again as hard as most real estate salesmen, was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis and the Booster's Club. George was truly a big man, a man of stature, a man of heart.

Why then, you may ask, was he arrested for Ray Barber's murder?

It probably wouldn't have happened at all if George's boss, Mr. Walter P. Grimes, the Grimes of Grimes, Hackett and Pederson, hadn't called him into his office that sunny, warm Friday after-

noon in May, a lazy spring day.

Mr. Grimes sat back in his big, leather chair, put the tips of his arthritic fingers together, looked across his huge walnut desk at George and asked, "What do you think of Ray Barber?"

George grinned his immense grin and shrugged, "He's a good salesman. . . ."

"But not the best?"

"I didn't say that."

"That's the trouble with you, George," Mr. Grimes said with a fatherly smile. "You can't see anything bad in anyone." The smile disappeared as he shuffled through some papers on his desk. "I just checked the salesmen's status reports. Barber hasn't made a sale or brought in a new listing in over a month."

"Everyone hits a slump."

Mr. Grimes shook his head. "It's more than a slump. I've had several complaints about him."

"Complaints?"

"From women prospects," Mr. Grimes said with a deep frown. "Seems he can't keep his hands off them. Now, George, you know we can't have things like that going on at Grimes, Hackett and Pederson. We're the most respectable real estate firm on the north side."

George nodded. "I'll talk to him," he said.

"Fire him. Now. Today."

"Fire Ray Barber? Me?"

"Yes, you. You're my office manager, aren't you?"

"But—"

"No buts. Fire him! He's crazy. I want him out of here for good by five o'clock. We're running a real estate office, not a home for maniacs!"

"But he's not—"

"Fire him!" Mr. Grimes shouted, pounding his desk.

"Yes, sir," George said, getting up to leave. "How much severance pay should I give him?"

"Not one red cent!"

It took George almost an hour to work up enough courage to call Ray Barber into his office.

Ray was a small, thin man with a small, thin mustache who had an annoying combination of tics and nervous quirks that gave him a look of constant agitation. He was the kind of a man you couldn't look in the eye for more than a few seconds without becoming nervous yourself.

After he sat down, George looked at the ceiling and, to sort of break the ice, said, "Nice day out, isn't it?"

The muscles of Ray's left cheek suddenly contracted and he pulled on his right ear lobe. Then his eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to say I should be out drumming up

business? That I'm loafing?"

George grinned, a smaller than usual grin, and said, "Heck, no. I just think it's a nice day, that's all." He took two cigars out of his vest pocket and handed one across his desk to Ray.

He took it, nervously fumbled with the wrapper, and said, "Okay. It's a nice day." He put the cigar in his mouth and lit it. Then he blew out a puff of blue smoke and rolled the cigar between his fingers. "You're going



to raise Cain with me for not making any sales lately, aren't you?" He made an annoying sucking noise through his teeth. "I saw you in there with Grimes. What'd you tell him about me?"

"Honestly, Ray, I didn't—"

"Don't give me any of that. What are you trying to do, get me canned?" His head jerked to one side. "Well, you try that, Georgie boy, and I'll get you."

"Now, wait a minute! I didn't have anything to do with this. It was all Mr. Grimes' idea."

"What was Grimes' idea?" Ray asked, drumming his fingers on the desk.

George decided he had better get it over with as quickly as possible. He took a deep breath and said, "You're fired."

The color drained from Ray's face. "So you finally got Grimes to do it—"

"I didn't."

"Who did then?"

"Do you want the truth?"

"Truth?" Ray laughed, a nervous, high-pitched laugh. "You don't know the meaning of the word. You've been lying about me for months, telling everyone I'm crazy. That's why I can't make any sales. Because you tell lies about me."

George was shocked. "Ray, believe me, I never—"

"No. You'd never do anything like that, would you? You're good old George, the all-American boy scout. Everyone likes and trusts you. That's how you get them. They trust you, and you lie about

them. You stab them in the back with gossip. Well, I'm on to you, George. Maybe you can fool all the other suckers, but you can't fool me. You're the kind of a man that should be destroyed. You should be stamped on like a bug and destroyed! And I'll do it, George. I'll do it if it's the last thing I ever do!"

George was shocked. He rose to his feet and asked, "Are you through?"

Ray seemed to calm down. "For the time being."

"Then I suggest you clean out your desk. Mr. Grimes wants you out of here by five o'clock."

Ray stood up. The muscles in his left cheek suddenly contracted again. "Okay. But you'll be hearing from me."

"I hope not."

"You will be," he said, taking a puff from the cigar. He tipped his hand toward George in a mock salute. "See you."

A week later, at the Booster Club luncheon, it began.

George was standing at the bar, sipping a bourbon and water, when Al Wright, another Grimes, Hackett and Pederson salesman, sidled up to him.

"What did you have against Ray Barber?" he asked.

"Me? Nothing," George said with a grin. "Mr. Grimes asked



me to fire him and I did. That's all there is to it."

"That's not the way Ray tells it."

"No?"

Al lowered his voice. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but he's been calling everyone in the office on the telephone. He claims you're off your rocker."

George laughed uneasily. "Me, nuts?"

"He says you fired him because you've got some kind of phobia about guys who wear mustaches."

"He's the nutty one. Why, my own father wore a mustache all his life."

Al smiled and asked, "How did you get along with your father?"

George shrugged. "Well, you know how it is—"

"Did you hate him?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No. I mean, maybe that's why you've got this phobia about mustaches."

George stared at him for a moment, then he said, "You're the nut."

Al laughed and gave him a jab in the ribs with his elbow. "That's right, George, everyone's nuts but you."

"Look. I told you I fired Ray because Mr. Grimes asked me to. That's all there is to it."

"Sure, sure," Al said. "I know.

You'd have to be crazy to fire a guy because you didn't like his mustache. Come on. Let's go in and eat."

The man who sat across the table from George and Al had a mustache just like Ray's. No matter how hard he tried, George couldn't keep his eyes off it. The man must have felt his eyes on him because, just before dessert was served, he asked, "Is there anything wrong with my mustache?"

George could feel the redness working up the back of his neck. "No, why?"

"You've been staring at it all through lunch. I thought it might be full of soup or something."

Al looked at George, and then looked at the man across the table. "He's got a phobia about mustaches."

"I told you, I haven't got a phobia about mustaches!"

"Then why were you staring at his mustache all through lunch?"

"I don't know. I was just staring at it, that's all." George wiped his mouth with his napkin and got up from his chair. "I'm sorry," he said, "I've got to get back to the office." It was a lie, of course, but anything was better than getting into a crazy argument with Al over a stupid mustache.

When George got back to the office, he found a small package wrapped in brown paper on his desk. He opened it and discovered it contained a false mustache. He looked for a card. There wasn't any. Then he checked the brown paper to see if there were a return address. The only thing he found was his name scrawled in a handwriting he didn't recognize. Anyone could have put it on his desk. He buzzed for his secretary. When she came in, he asked, "Do you know who put this package on my desk?"

"No, it was there when I got back from lunch."

"Well, get it out of here."

"What was in it?"

"A false mustache."

He wasn't quite sure, but he thought she had a strange smirk on her face as she picked it up. Ray must have called her, too.

Late that afternoon, a couple from Detroit came in and asked to see a four bedroom colonial. George had the floor duty at the time. He looked at the multiple listing and discovered there were five. They wanted to see them all. Since they had to fly back to Detroit the next morning, George was out with them until almost ten-thirty. When he finally arrived home he was tired and hungry and not in the mood for

jokes. But one was waiting for him.

As his wife, Ruth, served him warmed-over supper, she said, "You had the strangest phone call tonight."

"From who?"

"Whom," she corrected him.

"All right, dammit, from whom?"

"Ray Barber."

George almost choked. "What did that nut want?"

"He said to tell you he would never shave off his mustache. Why would he ever say a thing like that?"

"He thinks I fired him because I didn't like his mustache."

"Oh, George, you shouldn't have."

He looked at her blankly. "Shouldn't have done what?"

"Fired him because you didn't like his mustache."

"Look," he said, pointing at her with his fork, "I didn't say I fired him because I didn't like his mustache. I said, he *thinks* I did."

"Now, George, I know how you hate mustaches."

"What ever gave you a stupid idea like that?"

She smiled at him coyly. "Remember that New Year's Eve party we went to eleven years ago at the Fischers?" She sighed. "And remember that tall, dark,

handsome bachelor with the perfectly lovely mustache who kept flirting with me all night?"

"He was a short, skinny pip-squeak. And that stupid mustache of his made him look like Hitler!"

"Why, George, you're still jealous!" she squealed.

"Jealous!" he roared. "Not on your life!"

"Then why did you tell him you'd punch him in the nose if he didn't shave off his mustache?"

"Because I was drunk, that's why."

"You were jealous."

George's shoulders sagged. "All right. I was jealous. I hate all men with mustaches. I fired Ray Barber because I hated his stupid mustache. Are you satisfied now?"

"You shouldn't have," she clucked as she cleared away the dishes.

Everyone in George's dreams that night had a mustache.

Saturdays are always busy at a real estate office, so it wasn't unusual that George didn't notice the picture of his family that stood on his desk until just before closing. In fact, it wouldn't have been unusual if he hadn't noticed it at all, it had become such a fixture in his office. The only reason he did was that he was filling out

an earnest money contract and he needed more room on his desk. He picked up the picture to move it and was dumbstruck. Every member of his family had grown a mustache! Then he looked again, closer, and found someone had drawn the mustaches on the glass over the picture with grease pencil. He buzzed his secretary.

"Miss Quinn, this has gone far enough!" he exclaimed the second she walked into his office.

Somewhat taken aback, she said, "I don't understand, Mr. Winnard."

"Look at this portrait of my family," he said, holding the picture within four inches of her face.

Her eyes opened wide and she giggled. "Why, they all have mustaches! Did you draw them?"

"No, I didn't draw them."

"Then who did?"

"That's what I was going to ask you."

"Don't look at me like that, Mr. Winnard. I didn't do it. I know all about your phobia—"

"I don't have a phobia about mustaches!" he yelled, slamming the picture down on his desk so hard the glass shattered.

"Mr. Winnard!" she shrieked, and she ran from his office in tears.

He sat down at his desk, and,

as calmly as he could, tried to gather his thoughts. Suddenly, it all became perfectly clear. That crazy Ray Barber was trying to drive him crazy! Well, it wouldn't work. No, sir, it wouldn't work. He dialed Ray's number on the telephone.

Ray answered after the second ring.

"Ray," George said, slowly, trying to control the quaver in his

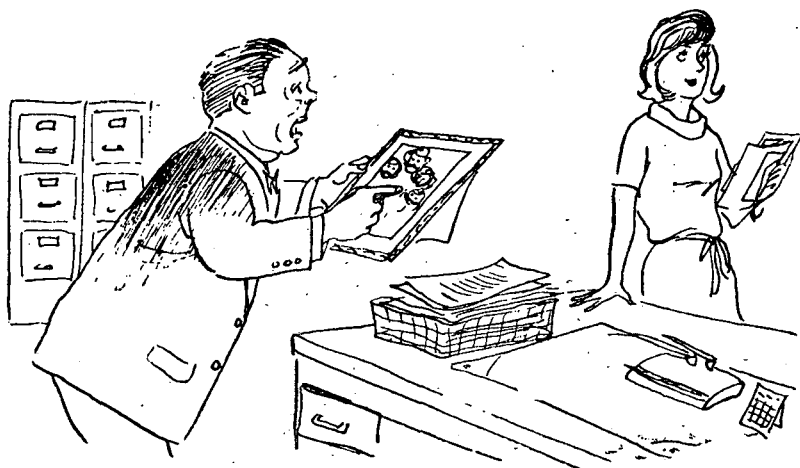
"You know it's me. Now, do you understand what I just told you?"

"Of course, you said you'd kill me if I told anyone you fired me because you hated my mustache."

"I mean it, Ray, cut it out."

"Why don't you like my mustache, George?"

"Because I'm jealous, that's why!" George yelled into the receiver. Then he slammed it down.



voice, "if you tell one more person I fired you because I have a phobia about mustaches, I'll kill you. Do you understand? I'll beat your brains out with my own hands."

"Is that you, George?" Ray asked, calmly.

"Yes."

"George Winnard?"

That night, the Winnards gave a small, intimate dinner party for Mr. Grimes and his wife, Belle. It was the first time in almost six months that they had been to dinner, and George had been very careful with the guest list. It included a few select—if not close—friends, the kind that never drink or talk too much. Ruth had pre-

pared a prime rib roast, laid out her best china and silver on her best lace tablecloth, and had even had Mr. Sandin, the somewhat effeminate but exclusive florist, arrange the centerpiece.

The party started out slowly, as all dinner parties do, but after two rounds of martinis and a few of George's choicest mixed-company jokes, the guests began to warm up. Mr. Grimes told the men about the state of the real estate business, while Belle deplored the deplorable household help situation to the women. By the time dinner was served, it was beginning to look as if it would be a successful party. It probably would have been, too, if the doorbell hadn't rung while George was carving the prime ribs.

You can imagine his surprise when he opened the door and discovered two policemen standing on the front steps.

"Are you Mr. George Winard?" one of them asked.

"Yes, of course," he answered nervously. Ever since he had been a little boy, just talking to a policeman had made him nervous. "Why? Is anything wrong?"

"Sorry, sir, the Captain said to bring you down to headquarters," the other one said in a low monotone.

"Now?" George asked. "Look,

I'm having a dinner party. Whatever it is, can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"Sorry, sir, the Captain said now."

"What is it, dear?" Ruth called from the dining room.

"Nothing," George called back. "Just two police officers." Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. "I can't go now, don't you understand? My boss is here. How would it look if I were dragged out of the house by two policemen right in the middle of the prime ribs?"

"You should have thought about that before you did what you did," the first policeman said.

"But what *did* I do?"

"The Captain didn't say. He just said to bring you in for questioning."

Ruth came to the door. "What's this all about, dear? Are they selling tickets to the Policemen's Ball?"

"Sorry, ma'am," the second officer said, taking off his cap. "We have to take your husband down to headquarters for questioning."

"Whatever for?" she asked.

"They won't tell me," George said.

"Well, then I wouldn't go."

"But, ma'am, he has to," the first policeman said, taking George by the arm.

"Okay," George said, pulling his arm free. "I'll go with you. Just don't make a scene."

"But what'll I tell the guests? What'll I ever tell Mr. and Mrs. Grimes?" Ruth gasped.

"Tell them anything," George said, resignedly, as he started down the front steps with the two policemen. When they reached the bottom, he turned and looked back at her. "Just don't tell them *why* I'm being taken to headquarters."

"But why are you?" she asked, on the verge of tears.

He gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know."

"Well, I just don't know how I'll ever explain it," she said, and she ran into the house.

Captain Watowski was a short, stocky, hairy man. He reminded George of a secret police interrogator he had seen in a movie once, except he hadn't worn a bushy, red mustache like Captain Watowski's.

"What's this all about?" George demanded.

Captain Watowski pointed to a chair and said, "Sit down, Mr. Winnard."

George did as he was told.

Captain Watowski lit a cigarette, then sat down on the edge of a table that had a tape recorder on it. He sat there smoking and star-

ing at George for a few minutes. Then he snuffed out the cigarette in a coffee can cover that doubled as an ash tray. He reached over and punched the "play" button on the tape machine. At first, George didn't recognize his own voice. Then, suddenly, he realized it was a recording of the conversation he'd had with Ray Barber on the telephone that afternoon.

When the tape was over, Captain Watowski punched the rewind button and said, "Tell me, Mr. Winnard, was that your voice?"

George shifted uneasily in his chair. "Yes, of course, but I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"How did you mean it?"

"It was just a figure of speech. I mean, I didn't mean it when I said I'd kill him."

"Just what did you mean, Mr. Winnard?"

George thought for a moment. "Well, I meant I'd *kill* him." He stopped and thought again. "No, that's not what I meant. . . ." He grinned his most expansive grin.

"I'm glad you think it's funny, Mr. Winnard." Captain Watowski lit another cigarette. "But let me warn you right now, I wouldn't make a habit of threatening people's lives if I were you. It could get you into a great deal of trouble, Mr. Winnard."

"I don't make a habit of it," George said, lamely.

Captain Watowski ignored him. "Unfortunately, I can't do anything but warn you this time. The recording was made illegally by Mr. Barber, without your knowledge. But illegal or not, I don't want you ever to threaten his life again. Do we understand each other, Mr. Winnard?"

"Yes," George answered in a low whisper.

"Good," Captain Watowski said, taking a deep drag from his cigarette. He sat and stared at George again until he had smoked the cigarette down to the filter. Then he deposited it in the coffee can cover. "You may go now, Mr. Winnard."

"You mean, that's all?"

"That's all."

George stood up and started to the door.

"Just a minute, Mr. Winnard."

"What?"

"How do you like my mustache?"

"It's beautiful."

Captain Watowski smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

The fury began to build up inside George as soon as he was outside the police station. Somehow, Captain Watowski's mustache had had the same effect on him as a red flag waved before a

bull. He lowered his head and charged blindly down the street in search of the nearest bar. He had to have a drink to calm him down, to bolster his demolished pride, to help him think.

Unfortunately, the two double shots of bourbon he gulped down at the Clover Leaf Bar did none of the three. His rational thinking process came to almost a complete halt. The only thing he could see through the blindness of his rage was a mustache. A thin mustache. Ray Barber's mustache. Barber's mustache. Barber . . . shave . . . razor! George laughed to himself. Why hadn't he thought of that before? He threw five dollars down on the bar and headed for the door. He had to find a drugstore.

Twenty minutes later he found himself standing in the hallway outside Ray Barber's apartment, a shiny, new straight-edge razor in his hand. He knocked on the apartment door. "I know you're in there, Barber!" he shouted. "Open up! I've got a present for you!"

The door opened and there was Ray Barber, the thin mustache on his upper lip, a .38 revolver in his hand. "Why hello, George," he said, pleasantly. "I've been waiting for you."

"You know what this is?" George asked, holding up his new

razor. "It's a straight-edge razor, that's what it is. And you know what I'm going to do with it? I'm going to shave off that stupid mustache of yours, that's what I'm going to do!"

Ray's mouth twitched into a smile and he pushed the gun under George's nose. "You know what this is, George? It's a .38 Smith and Wesson."

George looked at the gun under his nose and blinked stupidly, trying to focus his eyes on it.

"And do you know what I'm going to do with it?" Ray went on. "I'm going to destroy you, George."

George was suddenly jolted to his senses. "Are you crazy?" he asked.

"No, you are," Ray said with a snigger. "Everyone knows you have a phobia about mustaches." He lowered the gun and pushed it into George's stomach. "Now, please, won't you come in?"

"What are you going to do?" George asked, dumbly, as he walked into Ray's apartment.

"Why, I just told you," Ray said, closing the door behind them. His left cheek twitched. "But first I must call the police." He picked up the phone, tucked the receiver under his chin and dialed the number with one hand while he held the gun on George

with the other. "Captain Watowski, please." There was a short wait, then he said, "This is Ray Barber. I'm afraid your little talk with George Winnard didn't do any good. He's here now. I think he was going to kill me with a straight-edge razor." There was a short pause. "No, I have a gun on him right now. You'll be right over? Good. We'll be waiting for you." He put the phone down. "You know, George, I could kill you right now—"

"You are crazy."

Ray shook his head. "No, you are. Don't you realize that by now? You were crazy to fire me. I could have been the best salesman Grimes, Hackett and Pederson ever had. But you lied about me. And why did you lie about me? Because you're crazy, George. You'd have to be crazy to lie about me." He laughed and his head jerked to one side.

"You planned this whole, crazy thing," George said, helplessly.

"Of course," Ray said. "I couldn't be crazy and plan such a masterpiece, could I?" He made a sucking noise through his teeth. "Everyone knows about your mustache phobia, even the police. And you threatened to kill me. The police know that, too. They even gave me a permit to carry this gun, as protection."



"And now you're going to kill me?"

"Destroy you," Ray corrected. "Completely."

George blanched and his whole body began to shake uncontrollably. "You can't kill me. I have a wife and three children," he whined.

"Don't be melodramatic."

George fell to his knees. "Please don't kill me," he sobbed. "I'll talk to Mr. Grimes. I'll do anything. But please don't shoot me."

For a moment, the only sound besides George's sobbing was the wail of an approaching police siren. Then Ray said, "I didn't say I was going to shoot you."

George stopped sobbing and looked up at him. "You're not going to shoot me?" he asked, hopefully.

Ray laughed. "No. I'm going to *destroy* you!" His mouth twitched again, and he suddenly turned the gun into his own stomach and pulled the trigger. The deafening blast knocked him backward off his feet. He groaned and slowly sat up. "Here, George, catch!" he

gasped, throwing the gun at him.

George made an instinctive one-handed catch. "You crazy fool!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. He rushed over to Ray and looked down at him writhing on the floor. "You poor, crazy fool!"

"I'm not crazy," Ray said in a hoarse, labored whisper. "Shooting you would have been too easy. Now you'll suffer for months. People will lie about you, the way you lied about me. And then they'll kill you, George, they'll kill you." He coughed, and then lay still.

There was only one thing left for George to do. He opened the straight-edge razor and shaved off Ray's mustache.

And that's the way the police found him, standing over Ray's body, the murder gun in one hand, a straight-edge razor in the other.

Of course, George was charged with murder and would have been found guilty, too, if he hadn't been adjudged insane.

You see, everyone knew he had this phobia about mustaches. . . .



Whether a genius is to be categorized an intellectual or a mad-man apparently is dependent upon the scope and area of his experimentation.



**T**HE CITY was cool with a fine rain, and the boy ran lightly down an alley in a gloomy section where poor houses and tenements rose in the last light of day. He stopped beside a garbage can and lifted the lid swiftly, ruddy face showing cheerfully beneath a ragged cap. His jacket was wet and stained. Faded jeans, broken through at the

knees, came far short of the venerable tennis shoes encasing his sockless feet.

He prodded and poked and finally found a heel of bread. His white teeth bit hard, cracking the stale crust; then the bread was



*By James McKimney*

gone. He rubbed his jacket sleeve against his mouth, heard a sound of footsteps, and ran on, fleet as a deer's shadow. He cut through other alleys, darted across streets, nipping behind the flow of traffic, his motion springing with early youth.

Then there was the sound of complaining tires. He looked out

on a busy boulevard to see a small cat struck and sent spinning.

"No!" he breathed, then ran out between other cars to lift the now-still body. He came back to the sidewalk and trudged to the entrance of another alley where he sat down with the dead animal in his lap. Tears glistened in his eyes. He sniffed mournfully, drawing his hand across his nose, then sat for a long time blinded by tears. When the large hand touched his shoulder, he jumped.

A tall man with a long nose stared down, his fine, white hair tangled by the breeze coming up as the rain lessened.

"Your kitten?" the man asked gently, smiling, his voice a soft bass like echoing thunder.

"No."

"Are you frightened of me?"

"Nobody."

The man nodded, touching the thick woolen sweater covering his broad torso. "A fine way to be. Dead?"

"Run over."

"Shame." His hand was still on the boy's shoulder. The boy twisted out from under its pressure, half-crouched, ready for flight. "You picked it up from the street?" The man's words were easily shaped, bearing the accent of education.

"Yes," the boy said dully.

"Very good of you. I don't sup-

pose it would be any use to look for its owner, would it? It has no collar and tag."

"Nobody owns a cat," the boy said defiantly.

"Quite true. But what's to be done with it? Do you live nearby?"

The boy was silent, holding the cat, poised for escape.

"Well, you see," the man said, "he should have a nice burial, shouldn't he? I mean, that would be the very least one could do, wouldn't it? For what was probably a very nice cat?"

"I'll find a place," the boy said.

"I'll tell you, my kind friend. I have a small cottage no more than three blocks from here. Behind the cottage is a very nice fenced yard. It would be my very great pleasure to offer that as a final resting place for this animal. What do you think of that?"

The boy looked up at him warily, blue eyes ageless and without trust.

"Let's just take him over there." The man smiled and moved away, long legs swinging. He did not look back; when he had gone a dozen steps, the boy stood up and followed.

The man stopped before a small frame cottage, its time-battered front softened by the dimming light. He unlocked the door and turned to the boy. "Just bring him

in," he said, then stepped inside.

The boy stared at the door as he might a set trap.

"It's quite all right. The least we can do."

The boy came forward slowly and followed the man into a small livingroom littered with books, magazines, newspapers and strewn clothing.

"Move something and sit down," the man said cheerfully. He looked at the boy with deeply set gray eyes beneath thick white eyebrows. The boy pushed aside newspapers and sat down on the edge of a sofa tautly, holding the dead cat in his lap. The man moved into a small adjoining kitchen, saying, "We'll take care of this, don't you worry."

There was the sound of a door opening and closing. The man reappeared carrying a cardboard box.

"We'll put him in this, you see. Carefully. That's the way. There's dignity even in death, you know. Now—so. I'll just put the poor creature out on the back porch and bury him most properly in the morning."

"I can help," the boy said.

"No need. You've already done enough. I admire you, my young friend, for your extraordinary compassion."

"My what?"

"Your good feeling toward that

cat," he offered in explanation.

The boy looked at the door.

"No need to rush off," the man said pleasantly. "Have you had dinner?"

The boy's eyes widened a fraction.

The man moved into the small kitchen, saying, "I think we can find something here." He brought a can of spaghetti from a shelf, opened it and poured its contents into an old sauce pan. He removed a half loaf of French bread from a cupboard and cut it in slices. He found a cloth and dusted the round kitchen table, then placed two chipped plates and aged silverware on its surface. The spaghetti began to bubble in the pan on the stove. He turned to see the boy standing at the edge of the kitchen, staring at the stove. "Sit down, my boy. Hardly a feast, but something against the night anyway." He got a bottle of red wine and a glass from the cupboard and sat down opposite the boy. "I don't think it would be proper to offer you any of this, but I trust you don't mind my taking a few drops for myself?"

The boy sat wordlessly, staring from the man to the stove.

The man filled the glass and said, smiling, "Here's, to—ah, I don't think we've exchanged names, have we? Mine is Mr.

Wiggins. Mr. Alfred Q. Wiggins. And yours?"

"Mickey," the boy said, almost inaudibly.

"A nice name. I like that. And do you have a last name, Mickey?"

"No," the boy said softly.

"Then I'll just call you Mickey X. Is that acceptable to you, sir?"

"Is it what?"

"Is it all right if I call you Mickey X?"

"I don't care."

"Very good. And I'll drink to your good health." The boy was looking at the stove again. The man got up to remove the steaming spaghetti from the burner, the aroma of the sauce flavoring the air. The boy bent forward against the table, watching the progress of the pan toward his plate. His hands appeared on the surface of the table, clenching in anticipation. Using a spoon, the man pushed a quantity of the spaghetti onto the boy's plate. Finally he scraped all of it out. "Fact of the matter," he said, "I really would prefer just a bit of this bread with the wine, nothing more. You go at it, as they say."

The boy lifted the plate with one hand, clutched a knife in the other and scooped the spaghetti into his mouth, chewing and swallowing furiously. When the man had settled himself in his

chair, the spaghetti was gone. The boy reached for the bread and stuffed one piece after another into his mouth. The man swiftly took a slice for himself and leaned back, sipping the wine, looking at the boy in admiration. When the bread was gone, the boy slid his chair back. "I've got to go."

"Where, my boy?"

"I've got to."

"It really isn't polite, of course, to eat and run, as it were. Why don't you relax, my good friend? Am I going to hurt you?"

Nervously, the boy remained in his chair, looking at the man defensively.

"Mickey X," the man said softly. "Where do you live, my boy?"

"I don't have to stay here."

"Of course you don't. I merely thought it might be pleasant to have someone with whom to chat while I enjoy this modest wine. Do you have anything against talking with me?"

"I don't have to."

"Absolutely not. Where do you live, my small friend?"

"Alleys, mostly. Alleys are dark, at night. They're safe."

The man looked at the boy with fresh interest. "Safe from what?"

"From being caught."

"And why would someone want to catch you?"

"Because I don't want to be

caught. That's the way it goes."

The man nodded and sipped the wine carefully. "That is a certain truth, isn't it? You don't want to be caught. And so, naturally, someone would like to catch you."

"You're not going to."

"I have no intention of it. I like you as you are. Free. As the wind, I would suspect."

The boy nodded positively.

"No family?"

"Orphan."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry about that."

"I'm not. I never knew anything else."

"Then, of course, you wouldn't be sorry, would you? You have no home at all?"

"Three years ago I was at a home. Lots of us. I ran away."

"And you've been on your own ever since? Living off your wits, so to speak, all of that time?"

"I don't need anybody."

The man shook his head. "Quite an incredible boy all around. Let's see now, how old would you be?"

"I don't know."

"Seven, eight—possibly ten? It's hard to guess, isn't it?"

"I don't care how old I am."

"Naturally not. All that matters is that you're free, is that it?"

"They'll never catch me."

"Somehow, my boy, I have no doubt of that. I think I under-

stand something else too; your feeling for the cat. You're quite alike, really. You said it yourself—nobody owns a cat. And nobody owns Mickey X either, does he? We feel very deeply, when we can see ourselves in something or someone else; then when tragedy happens to that something or someone, we feel most sympathetic to it. In this case, the poor cat, now lying dead on my back porch. The cat ran free, didn't he? As you run free."

The boy stared at the man, now obviously awed by this philosophical examination of himself. "Are you free?"

The man laughed softly. "I'm afraid not."

The boy looked about, tensing. "Don't you live alone?"

"Quite true. Free in that fashion. But, you see, we're opposites, you and I. Do you understand?"

"No."

The man sipped the last wine in his glass, then poured more. "Well, I believe you are a totally free body, beholden to nothing or to no one. But I am a captive, a prisoner."

"Of what?"

"Your *brain*?"

"Your *brain*?"

"Torment of my life. I have quite an exceptional brain, my young friend. No fault of my own,

certainly. It simply is; has been, all of my life. That is my burden. I'm locked in the discipline of my brain, forced to carry out all of its desires. It is my master and always will be, until I might reach senility, or the sudden extinguishing of the flame, as our poor cat so recently experienced. Do you understand that?"

"No," the boy said.

"I'm simply trying to explain that you are north and I am south. You are east and I am west. And, I suppose, because the grass always appears so much greener on the other lawn, that's why I admire you so deeply. You are like the cat-prowling the alleys, running with the wind; obligated to no one and to nothing, with no master anywhere."

The boy blinked slowly, as if trying to comprehend.

"You like cats, do you?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Manx, Persian, Angora, those of inestimable blood mixtures, any of them—it doesn't matter, does it?"

"So they're cats."

"Of course," the man nodded.

"I'm leaving."

"Well, if you must. But I've enjoyed this chat immensely."

"You'll bury him, won't you?"

"You can count on it."

The boy was on his feet. The man got up to follow him to the door.

"You take care of yourself, Mickey X, as I'm sure you're capable of doing. You're not going to forget Mr. Wiggins, are you?"

The boy looked at him suspiciously.

"What I'm saying is, that one doesn't make a good friend every day."

"I don't have any friends," the boy said defiantly.

"Yes, I see—one of the pleasures a boy in your particular circumstances can't afford, I suspect. But remember, my boy, I admire your freedom. You have nothing to fear from me. I also admire your concern for that poor cat. If you should—and mind you, I hope all cats prowling freely on the streets tonight will be safe forever—but if you should find another such poor animal, you just bring him to Mr. Wiggins. That is quite a nice backyard I have, a much better resting place than most poor animals will ever receive."

The boy stared at him with his ageless eyes. "You're trying to trick me into coming back."

"Trick you! Why would I?"

The boy stared at him a moment longer, then went out the door swiftly.

Mr. Wiggins smiled at the closed

door, then returned to the kitchen where he finished the wine in his glass. Finally he stepped out to the small back porch and lifted the box containing the cat. Humming softly, he walked with it back through the house, along a short hallway, then opened the door of a darkened room. He reached knowingly through the blackness and switched on a bright light centered in a flat reflector hanging over a shining metal table. Still humming he lifted the cat from the box and placed it on the metal table in the harsh light. He surveyed the dead animal for a few moments, then his hand dropped and came back up with a scalpel. "So," he said gently, and the scalpel flashed.

Three days later, in the pale glow of sunset, the boy appeared at Mr. Wiggins' dooryard, holding the limp body of a very large yellow cat.

"Oh, my heavens," Mr. Wiggins said sympathetically. "The poor fellow."

"It was a she," the boy said.

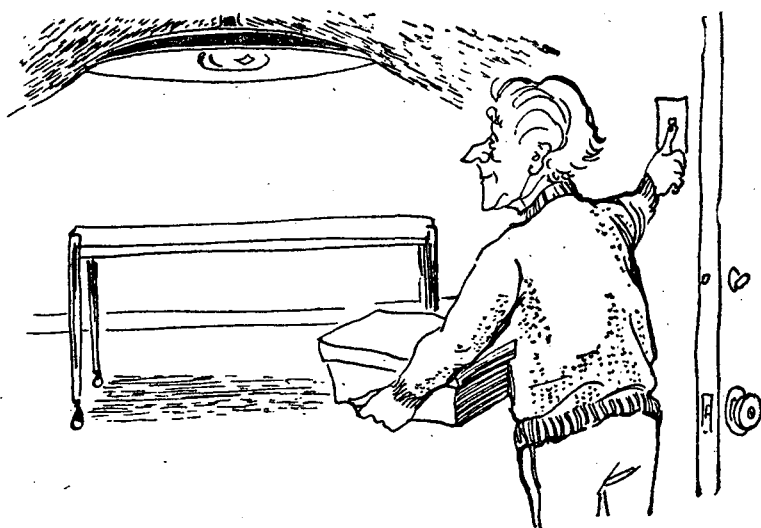
"Ah—well, even so, a dreadful shame. Freeway?"

The boy nodded solemnly.

"Freeways. Progress. But it would be very hard to explain that to a cat, wouldn't it? Should he understand?"

"Can we bury her?"





"Just bring her right through the house, Mickey X. Come right along." The boy followed the man through the house to the porch. "Now you put her in that box, and I'll see that she's properly attended to in the morning."

"Can't I help now?"

"You leave the matter up to Mr. Wiggins, my boy. Work such as that can be done in the lonely morning hours. But I would so much rather enjoy your visit now, even on this tragic note, by offering you a bit of dinner."

The boy's eyes brightened. "You sure buried the other one?"

"Of course."

"Where?"

"Let's step outside." The man motioned toward a plot of recently

turned earth. "A very nice spot, wouldn't you say?"

"There isn't anything to mark it."

The man nodded seriously. "That's true, isn't it? Well, now." He looked across the yard at a collection of rocks near the gate leading to the alley behind. "Of course." He walked over and got a rock and placed it carefully over the grave. "That should do nicely, shouldn't it? And I'll bet you might have gotten up an appetite running with the wind today, as you do. Let's see what we can find."

The boy sat waiting for a can of macaroni to be heated. After the man had dished it, the food was gone in a twinkling. The man

smiled, sat down with his wine, and looked at the boy fondly.

"Very good of you to bring that poor creature for its proper burial. You have a large heart, my boy."

Now, the boy appeared less nervous. "What do you do?"

"For a living?"

The boy nodded.

"Oh, I've done several things."

"Like?"

"I was a lawyer."

"You?"

"Surprises you, does it? But it's quite true. My brain, you see, driving me always. Yes, I was quite a good lawyer. Quite a famous lawyer, as a matter of fact."

The boy looked at him in disbelief. Mr. Wiggins smiled.

"You don't believe that?"

"You don't have to lie to me. I mean, I don't have any friends, but if I did. . . ."

"I could be one of them?"

The boy looked down at his plate self-consciously.

"That's nice to hear," the man said gently. "But I'm not lying. You see, I wouldn't have any reason, would I? Yes, a successful and famous lawyer. Then, because I have this most disastrously curious brain, I was driven into finance. A challenge, and I met it, my boy; made quite a fortune. Gave much advice. Then lost interest, gave away most of the

money." He shrugged. "I kept enough to live in this fashion. But you don't believe me, do you?"

The boy rubbed his nose, silently.

"Well, you stop at a library sometime, when you have a moment. I think you'll find that Mr. Alfred Q. Wiggins is telling you the truth. There are substantial references." The man sighed and sipped his wine. "Law, finance; have to keep going, make full use of that which God gave me. Exploring, exploring. Why? Why does the world go 'round. My only value in this universe is, I suppose, taking on the new challenge, testing it, defeating it, giving it my measure of contribution. It's something, isn't it, my boy?"

"I don't know."

"There always must be something, a reason. But you, now—" He shook his head regretfully. "Must be there somewhere. It must be."

"I've got to go."

"Yes. But I'm glad you came back, Mickey X. You never need fear Mr. Wiggins. It was awfully good of you to think of that poor cat. She'll be well taken care of, you can be sure. And if you find another—"

"Goodby, Mr. Wiggins."

The man smiled warmly. "Goodby."

When the boy had gone, Mr.

Wiggins finished his final glass, then stood up and moved briskly to the back porch. Moments later, he opened the door to the darkened room.

In twilight, the man stood beside the boy in the small yard and gazed at five stones, each set a foot apart from the other. He had dropped his hand absently on the boy's shoulder; but the boy made no effort to slip away.

"I can help with this one," the boy said.

"Enough for you to be so kind as to pick up these poor creatures and carry them here. You leave the digging to Mr. Wiggins. I'll take care of the new one first thing in the morning. Now let's see about dinner for you."

When the contents of a can had been devoured by the boy, the man leaned back in his chair, touching his glass of wine. The boy stared back at him, saying, "I went to the library."

"Oh. You mean about checking the truth of what I told you?"

The boy nodded. "I can't read, but I asked a woman. She looked it up—about you. It's true, isn't it? She said you were famous as a lawyer, then as an econo—"

"Economist?" Mr. Wiggins nodded agreeably.

"She said she didn't know what

had become of you. I didn't tell her. I shouldn't have, should I?"

"I think you did the right thing entirely. Past days should be forgotten, except to bring forth knowledge gained." Mr. Wiggins nodded again. "So now you know the truth about me."

"Could I become a famous lawyer, Mr. Wiggins?"

Mr. Wiggins smiled sadly. "Ah, my boy, I wish I could answer that positively. I wish I could say it might come true. But one makes his choice, you see. And you've made yours."

"Why can't I be?"

"It requires schooling, for one thing. Quite a lot. Then you've got to deal with people, constantly. You say you can't read."

"No," the boy said, obviously regretful about the fact for the first time in his life.

"And people—you've escaped from them rather well all along, haven't you?"

"I don't really know anybody—except you."

"Yes, and I feel honored about that, Mickey X. But, you see, you'd have to give up this life of yours, go to school first, catch up, get ahead of it. Years and years, and people—you'd have to accept people—dozens; hundreds. Would you like that?"

"No," the boy said definitely.

"Well, there it is. To run with the wind, Mickey X, you have to sacrifice other things." The man sipped his wine thoughtfully. "And where will it lead?" He shrugged. "I'm afraid, my boy, the age is against you—or you are against the age. This is the age of purpose, you see? At least it gives the illusion of it. Everyone is seeking purpose, direction, meaning—whether or not he finds it. Perhaps nothing will amount to anything, finally, but we have to think it will—most of us, anyway. Law, Economy, Science, whatever it might be, there must be a contribution left behind, something for others to use as a rung on the ladder, in order to climb steadily.

"Why?" the boy asked.

"Why, indeed? Because this is the way of man, most men; but not your way. Your way is to breathe, live, darting about, like a freedom-loving cat, the animal you love so dearly; never to be restricted, never to be imprisoned, never to be caught."

"No, *sir*."

The man nodded. "And so it is. A remarkable young man you are. All out of step with things, and yet a very bright light. Don't you worry about becoming a lawyer, an economist, anything at all. You must have a meaning, my good friend, somewhere in the pattern

of things. That must be. And be glad you're not bound and tied to that which controls me." He leaned back, furrows cutting deeply around his eyes. "Would that I could be as you are, or could have been. But first it was the law. Then the matter of finance. And now—something that has obsessed me all along."

"Did what?"

"Been in my brain, deeply, so that I knew I could never escape it—science, my friend, most specifically medical science. There all the time, and no escaping it; so I must do what I must, to leave behind what I can. No time left now for the formal education for that. But, you see, I don't need it. Not really. . . ." He straightened finally. "Enough of that. I am what I am. You are what you are."

The boy was silent for a time, then he said, "Mr. Wiggins, I'm glad we met."

"So am I, Mickey X."

The afternoon was fading, the sky turning gray with the last sunlight; a chill was in the air, and there was the sound of cars moving on the freeway beyond. Mr. Wiggins stood in his yard and counted twenty-two stones placed in careful rows. Finally he went inside to his kitchen, passing an empty cardboard box. He looked

at a clock above the old stove, then at the unopened can on the table. He sat down and drummed his long fingers against the table, looking at the wine bottle. Finally, he got up and put on his thick sweater, tugging up the collar, and went outside.

Cars hummed by infrequently along the neighborhood avenue, and he walked along, looking. He turned into an alley and went its length, then came out and moved down another avenue. Nearing the freeway, he watched lights flaring as cars whipped along its surface. The air was cold against his face now, and he kept his hands shoved deeply into his trouser pockets.

There was a sudden sound of tires skidding, and he heard a boyish exclamation of dismay. Hurrying, he approached an off-ramp to see the boy darting toward the unmistakable form lying inert.

"Mickey?" he called.

As the boy lifted the fallen cat, other headlights flared as a car cut down the ramp, swiftly. Again tires shrieked against the pavement.

"Mickey XI" the man screamed.

There was a thumping sound. The boy spun sideways. The car slowed, momentarily, its driver looking back, then it whipped on.

Mr. Wiggins moved quickly, scrambling onto the ramp to lift the slight figure into his arms, then dodged off just as new lights shone and another car sped down the ramp. He carried the boy through dark shadows, off the avenue, into an alley, where he examined the still form in the dim light of a streetlamp beyond.

"My boy?" he said softly.

There was no reply.

Slowly then, wearily, he walked through the alleys, keeping to the darkness, until he reached the small cottage. He carried the boy inside and paused in the living-room with its litter. He whispered, "Like a freedom-loving cat." He nodded slowly. "Yes."

He carried the boy to the darkened room where his hand reached through blackness and switched on the bright light centered in the flat reflector hanging over the shining metal table.



*"He is no wise man who will quit a certainty," we are told, but he is, indeed, a sagacious fellow who recognizes when to quit.*

**T**HEFT is not normally regarded as one of the finer arts, but I had attained a degree of finesse which made it just that for me. It had been my only business for years, and had afforded me a great deal of satisfaction, not to mention

## *the* Tourmaline



more tangible gains. Up until the day of my retirement which, sadly enough, was yesterday, it would be only truthful to state, that in the class of daylight larcenists I was

one of the best, truly an artist.

I had my own working rules. I was never armed, always sorted alone, would rather disappear than face violence or even loud noise.

I planned my junkets in thorough, orderly fashion, and carried them through with the highest aplomb. With me, it was an exhilarating game, and I preferred wits to brutishness every time.

I had been out of things for



some time with a protracted illness. With my lungs functioning normally again, I drove the rented car yesterday with the windows open to the warm, fall afternoon air. My destination was the suburban, expensive, but-not-quite-expensive-enough-for-a-doorman, apartment of the young Mrs. Roger Whitby, owner of an opulent tourmaline mink coat, just returned from storage.

My business suit was proper, just in case I encountered anyone. I wouldn't, of course, because Mrs. Whitby's cleaning woman wasn't expected till tomorrow. Mrs. Whitby, herself, was downtown with two of the other three residents of the building, enjoying a

Wednesday matinee, as was her custom. The fourth occupant was an old dowager who always heard noises. No one took them seriously.

I parked the car with the fictitious license plates fully in view. It was like the old days, except that the setting was new. No more really big cities for me—too much violence now. I wondered what the local crowd would think of my style? Of course, this afternoon's work would not be spectacular. I intended merely to pick some locks, lay the tourmaline mink coat appreciatively in my furrier's silk-lined bag (now nicely folded in a special inner pocket of my jacket), and walk out the front door with it.

Takes nerve, you think? That was the thrill. There was always the chance I'd meet someone, the possibility of an unexpected call for suavity and wits. When that happened, the play was on, and I was superb. Invariably, I got what I'd come for, so it was like a jolt of adrenalin for me to stand in the doorway after intimidating the last lock, and find her staring at me. How long had she been there, tightening her fingers around a large cooky press?

"The door was ajar," I said, smiling and taking off my hat. "Mrs. Whitby's expecting me."

"She ain't here." I saw her toy

with the idea of telling me Mrs. Whitby wouldn't be in all afternoon, then decide against it. No sense letting me know how alone she was. For my part, I had no wish to frighten her. Heaven forbid those ghastly screams!

She was suspicious, but it wasn't time to retreat yet. Years of experience in these matters told me that.

"I have an appointment, I'll wait," I said guilelessly, and sat.

"This ain't my reg'lar day. I'm only here making little sandwiches for her party tonight. I'm goin' in a few minutes."

Verbally, she was pushing me out the door. But no, thank you, I'd stay. Now she'd have to leave. So much the better. We'd go together and, once certain she was on the bus, I'd come back for my prize.

Her eyes pinpointed a large, partially open, square bundle in the hall where I'd come in. She was a handsome woman in her dour way, and not overly fat, but her demeanor was stupid and dull. What a pity that cleverness, once you are born, is impossible to come by.

She went back to her work and closed the door between us. I took a cat step toward the package but the sound of an electric beater from the kitchen alerted my automatic warning system. Was the noise meant to cover up a call to the po-

lice from an extension phone?

With accustomed agility, I was at the kitchen door and opening it within seconds. She was indeed at the beaters, mixing something. When she saw me, she jumped.

"I've startled you," I said unctuously, my apology implied. "Can you tell me when Mrs. Whitby is expected?"

"You're the one, poppin' in!" She laughed nervously, but I detected in it the coy titter of a maiden lady rattled at an unexpected meeting with a gentleman caller—not fear. *You old dog! You've been away so long, you've forgotten what a handsome rogue you were with the ladies!* "I really couldn't say," she lied, putting the last bowl away. "I gotta go now, so I guess you hafta, too."

"I'll leave when you do, I said, firmly. Her eyelids fluttered like a foolish cow's. Did she think I was going to follow her?

"I guess I really knew who you was all the time," she said, kittenish. "You're the man to repair the sterling silver tea service, ain't cha? Mrs. Whitby's got it all ready to go. She thought you was comin' tomorrow."

Oh, the delicious, double-edged humor of it! Was I the man to pick up a sterling tea service? The gods of serendipity must be laughing out loud!



"You got credentials, I s'pose?" It was not so much a request, as a boast that she was knowledgeable in this sort of business transaction.

*A pocketful, Madame. Chauffeur? Chairman of the Board?* I ruffled through my wallet and came up with a "Silversmith Representative" identification card.

She peered at it importantly and nodded, then placed a protective layer of tissue over the magnificent Georgian coffee urn, closed the lid and gave the big package to me.

"Be seein' yuh," she said, cute, and shut the door behind me.

The box was heavy. I was glad to get it to the front seat of the car and rest. My recent illness left me weak at times. Besides, a vague dissatisfaction with something was beginning to percolate in my brain. I drove to a spot around the corner

from the nearest bus stop to wait.

She came, finally, boarded the bus and sat in the front seat next to the window. Our glances locked. She smiled—like an equal, a colleague. The realization of what was out-of-focus struck me. Mrs. Whitby would never send out her tea service on the day of a party.

My fist drummed the big box. For the first time in my career I knew the humiliation of walking off with the booby prize. I'm ashamed to say, I felt meek. She had bested me, but her technique was without a flaw. I dipped my head to her in acknowledgement.

I could see the top of her generously stuffed shopping bag as it rested on her lap. As I said, she was an uncommonly good-looking woman. I wondered how she'd look in the tourmaline mink coat.

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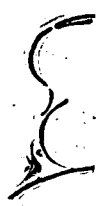
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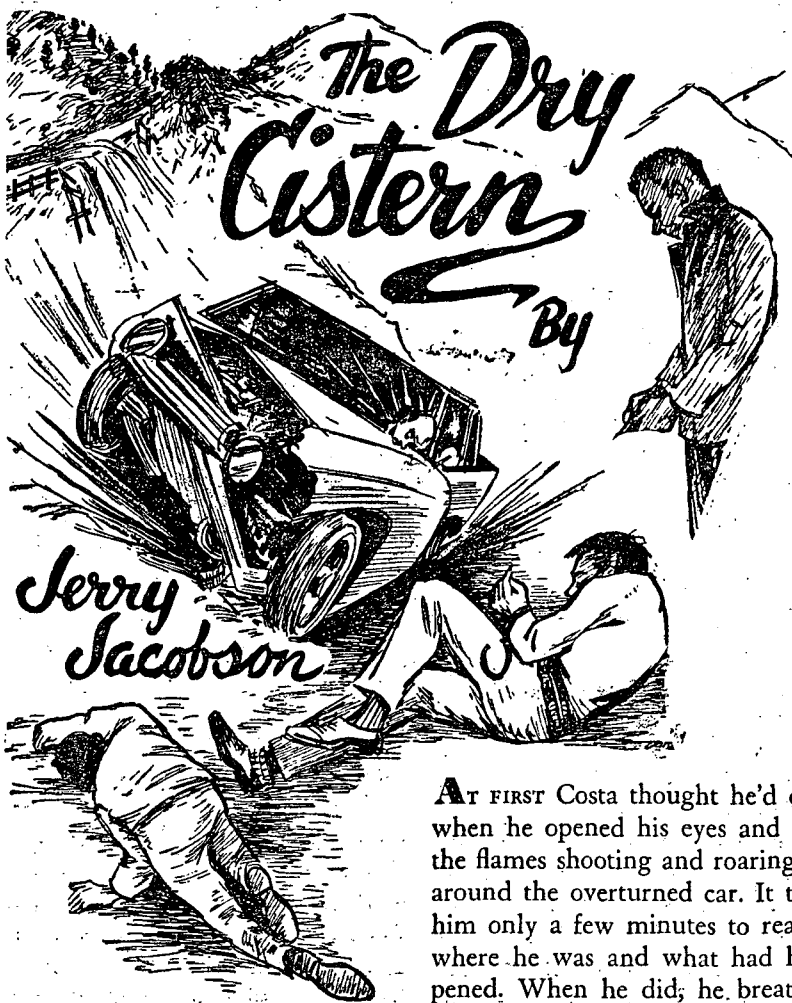
*The man who denies himself to reason often is the instrument of his own destruction.*



# The Dry Cistern

By

Jerry Jacobson



AT FIRST Costa thought he'd died when he opened his eyes and saw the flames shooting and roaring up around the overturned car. It took him only a few minutes to realize where he was and what had happened. When he did, he breathed

easier. There had been an accident, someone yelling something about, "We're going over! Hang on!" and then the landscape flying past the window, then the crash, and he was alive.

When he rose to his knees and looked around, he saw the others had not been so fortunate. The prison guard who had been driving the car lay inside it, his head thrust through the shattered windshield with a frozen look on his face. The other guard, the one that had been sitting next to the driver, was sprawled on his stomach some thirty feet away, probably thrown out an opened door when they hit bottom.

As Costa gathered courage and began to test parts of himself for injury, he heard a low-pitched moan come from the ground on his right side. Vinson, he remembered with annoyance, was the detective who had been assigned to escort him the sixty-odd miles from the Riverton City Jail to State Prison. Before they had plunged off the cliff (they had been crawling through the tight, mountain curve, so something must have gone wrong with the car) the two of them had been handcuffed together. They still were. Smiling, Costa reached down and removed the .38 Police Special from the holster inside Vinson's coat. The detective

let out another agonizing moan.

They had to move back, Costa saw now. The flames were eating their way back toward the car's gasoline tank. Quickly he checked Vinson for injuries. There was no bleeding, but the detective's right arm seemed to be turned crazily. It lay beside him like a crooked branch off a tree. Costa reached across the body and touched the arm gently near the elbow, causing the detective to stiffen his body in pain. No doubt of it, the arm was broken.

Costa worked carefully but quickly. He loosened the straps on the detective's shoulder holster, then gently lifting the distended arm, slipped it in under the slackened bindings. Inside a pocket in Vinson's coat he found the ring of keys and released the double set of handcuffs. He took a hurried, fearful look over his shoulder at the flames which now engulfed the entire car. It was going to be close. Taking a firm hold on Vinson's ankles and scooting backwards, he dragged him across the field toward a grove of trees.

They made it to cover not a moment too soon. The explosion shook the ground like a small earthquake, throwing metal in all directions. When it was quiet again, Costa went across the field to check the guard who lay close by, not

knowing what he would do if he found him alive. Bind him? Take him along to that \$80,000 as a second hostage? The decision wasn't necessary. One close look told him the guard's neck had been broken.

Returning to the grove of trees, he saw Vinson was conscious. Costa said quickly, "Don't move your right arm. It's broken."

"Where are we?" Vinson asked weakly. "Costa? Is that you, Costa? What happened?"

"There was an accident. Car went through a guard rail and down a hillside." He saw Vinson's eyelids close. "You out?" he asked.

"No."

"You hurt anyplace else besides the arm?"

"No." Vinson shifted his body, craning his neck around the thick trunk to look out into the field. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"Dead. Both dead."

"Okay," the detective said wearily. "What now?"

Costa did not answer immediately, though he knew perfectly well *what now*: The money, of course; that \$80,000 he and Phelan had got in the Riverton Savings and Loan heist six months earlier.

"Let it cool a year," Phelan had suggested. "I know of a place—the old Bailey farm, about forty miles from Riverton. Nobody lives there now, the land's dead. There's a dry

cistern, forgotten as the old Bailey place itself; just the spot."

Well, Costa was through with all the fooling around. Keeping close to that money, and dodging strangers at the same time, just did not work. He had proved that last week when he was recognized and arrested by that patrolman in Riverton. It just hadn't worked. You had to get food. You had to buy clothes and have them cleaned, and every once in a while you had to have a Saturday night toot somewhere. This freak accident was an omen, his second chance, to do what he had wanted to do all along, get that money and spend it, consecutive numbers, high denominations and all. There were places—Hawaii, Mexico, Europe, maybe.

Vinson was getting to his feet now, leaning his back against a tree for support as he hiked himself up. Costa tossed him the ring of keys, keeping the .38 leveled on the detective's chest.

"Take off the handcuffs and place them on the ground," he ordered. Vinson obeyed.

"Now the clothes," Costa said. "I can't help you. You understand. Just do the best you can."

Costa kept a close eye on Vinson as he undressed, holster straps first. The dead arm fell and Vinson winced with pain. Then he wriggled out of the jacket and shirt, the

trousers and shoes, using one arm.

While Vinson was busy undressing, Costa did the same, keeping his eyes and the pistol trained on his man. Blue prison jacket first, then the dark blue denim shirt, the trousers and shoes.

They exchanged clothing, tossing the garments across to each other through the moonlit half-darkness, then re-dressed.

Costa finished long before the injured detective, and used the free moments for thought. First, he would have to call Phelan to let him know his own displeasure with the present setup. Perhaps he could even persuade Phelan to join him for a trip south.

Phelan was a smart heist artist, one of the best Costa had ever known. True, his post-heist plans weren't always the best, but Phelan did have a certain genius for casing a lay and coming up with new wrinkles for age-old maneuvers. The thought of their parting ways now, after only one job, seemed a waste of talent and brains.

The time element was in their favor. The remainder of the ride to State Prison would have taken roughly forty-five minutes, with no stops along the way. That was free time now, three-quarters of an hour before the wheels of the law would once more be set in motion. Better still, no cars had passed on the

highway since the accident. With the fire from it now completely out, no one would know it had taken place. There was a pay telephone at a service station two miles farther down the highway toward the prison, and from there to the old Bailey place, on foot, took only about ten minutes. Phelan could make it there from his rooming house in Cedarville in five, if he drove. Yes, the time factor was definitely in their favor.

Vinson was fully dressed now, standing in the shadows like a darkened ghost. He had his damaged arm crooked across his chest again, as if he had discovered it pained him less there. Out of the darkness, he said, "Costa, forget it. Forget that money. Be smart. You can turn this accident into a lightened sentence. I can get it for you. You turn state's evidence and tell us who was in on the Riverton job with you, and I can promise you a reduction. Five-to-ten."

"Vinson, can it! Just can it!" Costa said, with a contemptuous sneer to show he wasn't kidding. Five-to-ten! Oh, that was sweet, all right, very short and sweet. And just where would that leave him? It would leave him in 1976 and fifty years old, that's where it would leave him! Fifty, fat-bellied, and flat-busted. But 1966, well, that was something else again. In 1966,

today, he was forty, firm-bellied, and forty-thousand dollars rich.

Back up on the highway, double cuffed to his prisoner, Costa led Vinson along the shoulder facing into traffic, feeling a little bit now like the detective whose clothes he wore. Pretty good fit, he thought, except for the narrowness in the shoulders of the suit coat. And that pistol—it gave him confidence and security. Holstered there against his chest, it seemed almost human.

The service station was empty when they arrived. Costa led Vinson to a telephone booth nuzzling the edge of the highway and shackled him to the light standard next to it. If anyone passed, they would see nothing unusual about it, just a prisoner who had been caught trying to escape from the nearby prison.

After a few moments in the office, explaining things to the attendant and warning him to keep what he knew about a detective and his prisoner under his hat, Costa went back outside to the booth and called Phelan.

Phelan answered on the second ring, somewhat incredulously. "Joey? That you? Ain't you supposed to be inside?"

"I worked a deal, got a little bit of a lucky break," Costa said. "Auto accident on the way."

"On the level?" Phelan said.

"An auto accident? You hurt?"

"No, but I'm hot," Costa said quickly. "I haven't got much time, so listen. I'm on my way to the Bailey place for my half, and then a fast flyer to Mexico."

"I thought we was going to let that loot cool a while, Joey," Phelan said.

"Six months is long enough," Costa said. Too long, he thought; too long since enjoyment, too long since he had a few bucks in his pocket. "I'm moving out, Phelan. You coming?"

"Have to get a car first. We'll need a car. Old Mrs. Jamison's got her sedan parked out front," Phelan mused aloud. "Real grouch, Mrs. Jamison."

"You gotta be at the Bailey place in a half-hour, if you're coming," Costa warned. "I can't wait any longer than that. Like I say, I'm very hot right now."

"Mexico, you say. Okay, sounds all right. Half-hour."

Costa hung up and went back to the office. He told the attendant the prison couldn't spare a car, so he was going to have to walk his man in. The attendant, young, eager, caught up in the excitement of it all, offered to drive Costa there in his pickup truck. Costa frowned and told him it was against regulations. His grim tone made it seem like inside information. It was

more than enough to frighten the kid into silence.

Costa returned to Vinson, standing like a horse hitched to a post. It was all going like clockwork now, going fast and steady. Soon, he and Phelan would be off to Mexico, the excitement and the conquest beginning anew.

As Costa removed the steel ring from the light standard and fitted it back over his own wrist, Vinson's voice was emphatic. "Costa, give it up! Get on that phone again and call State and tell them where we are. I can still get you that reduced five-to-ten."

"That's nothing but a con and you know it, Vinson," Costa said harshly. "What do you take me for? Some punk kid just out of juvenile hall?"

"I take you for a pretty smart Joe, Costa. And I can promise you that reduced sentence. Just tell me who's in this with you and where you're keeping that \$80,000."

Costa grinned and spouted a laugh. "Tell you?" he said. "I'll do even better than that. I'll *show* you." He prodded Vinson back onto the highway. "Come on, cop. We got some quick-time to do."

It was roughly a mile to the path slashed obliquely into the wood, thick with evergreen trees. Costa nudged the detective onto it, prodding him along through the dark-

ness, while he sensed the way and felt the minutes creeping by. There wasn't that much time to make it to the Mexican border cleanly, but with Vinson along for company, they'd have little trouble. It was all tactics now, all a matter of finding



the right roads and making the right turns, and Costa had a penchant for tactics.

When they hit the clearing with the fences and barns in the distance, Vinson spoke up. "Of course, the Bailey place," he said. "Where? In the loft in the old barn? The chicken coops?"

"Vinson," Costa moaned deprecatingly, "and risk a fire or a gang of kids looking for a place to play? I thought you were smarter than that."

"Where then?" Vinson asked, puzzled.

"You ever hear of anybody looking for water in a dry cistern?"

"Hmm. Clever."

"Everything me and Phelan do is clever," Costa said. "We're just a couple of clever fellas, proving crime really does pay. That's all."

They moved out across the dim field, the moonlight showing the chuckholes and dips of long abandoned planting furrows, covered now with brown grass. In the distance, some two hundred yards away, Costa could make out the image of a third person standing in tall grass on the rim of the wood. It had to be Phelan, and he was right on time. Costa smiled and relaxed. Another hour or two, and they'd be sitting and watching the world roll by.

When the sudden burst of shots rang out, Costa blinked. Phelan was firing at them as they moved closer, pulling shots off like quick flashes of lightning. Was he mad? They needed Vinson!

When Costa finally realized it wasn't Vinson that Phelan was fir-

ing at, it was too late. He counted four shots, then the fifth slammed into his chest with a dull thud. He felt no pain, just shock, just sudden, unbelievable shock. The sixth tore into his stomach, and when he opened his mouth for air, he found he could not inhale. Violently he threw back his head and tried gulping for air, but it was like breathing in solid rock, as if all the precious life fuel everywhere had suddenly ran out. Then the sky slipped up and away, and the brown grass came up to meet his eyes, and then he was dead.

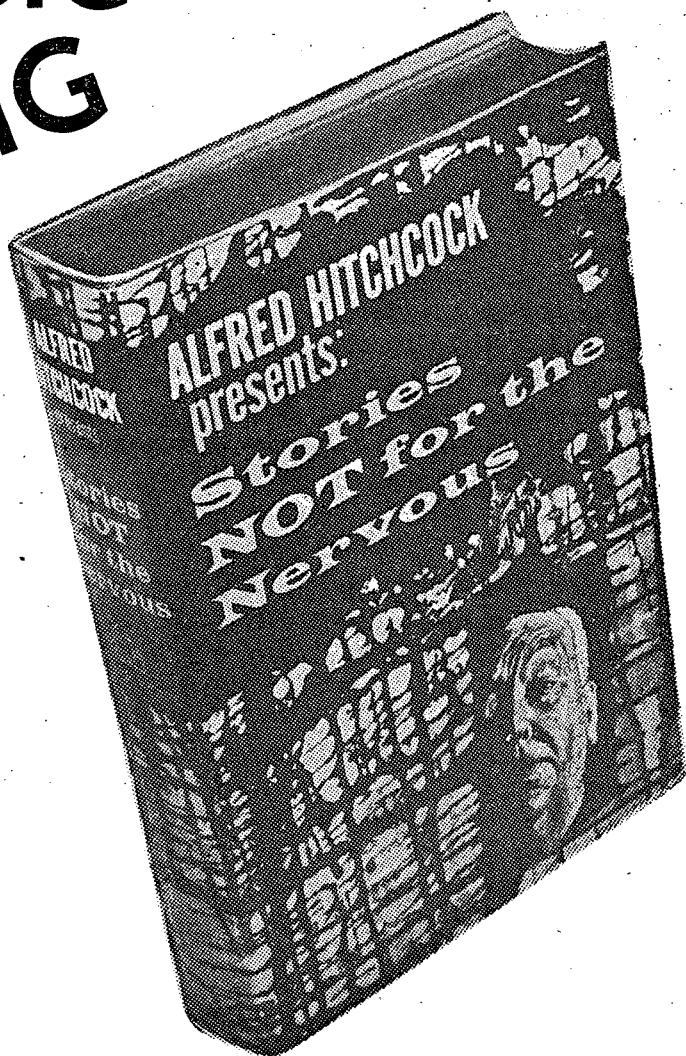
Vinson knelt down beside Costa's body. He removed the .38 from the shoulder holster flecked with blood. There was no need to hurry. Phelan was out of bullets now, coming up out of the darkness, hopping and shouting victoriously, "Joey, I got him for you! I seen the handcuffs flash, and the suit, and I knew it was a set-up. I knew! You couldn't say anything on the phone because he was right there beside you—but I got him for you, anyway, Joey. I got him for you anyway!"





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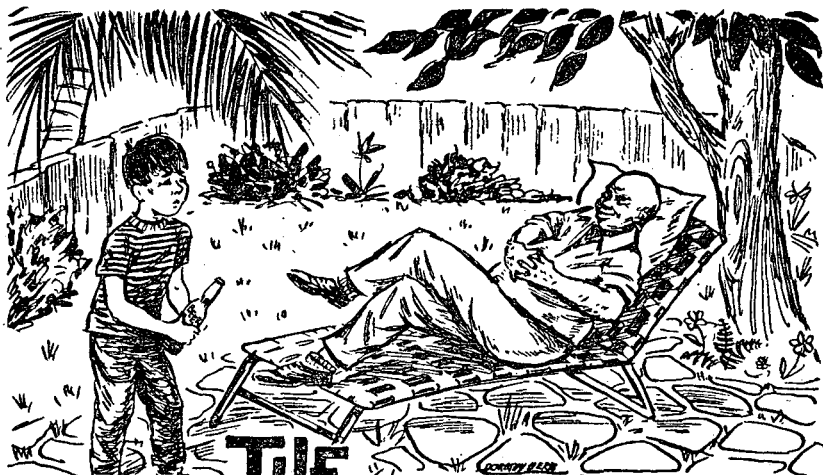
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*A cat may be belled, but on man falls the responsibility.*



# THE GOOD THIEF

By

## HAL ELLSON

SUNLIGHT glinted on the tall palm in the patio next door. Through half-closed eyes Victor Fiala watched the light, then gazed at the avocado tree directly above his head, its dark green leaves shad-

owed and cool like the rest of the patio, that godsend of privacy where a man could escape the turmoil of the world.

Fiala sighed and kept staring overhead. It was good to be home, good to rest. He sighed again and his eyes started to close. He was on the brink of sleep when he caught himself.

"Jose!" he shouted.

His voice echoed in the patio, but there was no answer to his call. A man has to do for himself, he sighed, and started to rise. The effort was too much. Back he fell

and his eyes closed. Why had he called Jose? Why? Why? Why? The light faded and all sound, but now, at a great distance, he heard a faint tattoo of footsteps; someone approaching from half across the world. You're too late, he said to himself without knowing what he was saying, and the tattoo grew louder. His eyes slitted open, and across the shaded patio he saw his grandson coming toward him with that same look on his face, a perpetual frown of concern as if he carried all the world's burdens on his fragile shoulders. But this was a dream, not the real Jose. Fiala closed his eyes.

"Grandpa!"

He jumped in his chair and there stood Jose before him with a cold bottle of beer in his hand.

"So you finally came," Fiala said. "What did you do, fall asleep?"

"No, you did," Jose answered, handing him the bottle.

Fiala laughed and tipped it. He was still drinking when a loud knocking started up on the front door. Down came the bottle and he frowned at his grandson. "All right, see who it is," he said.

Jose ran to the door, opened it and returned to the patio, leading a neighbor.

"Telephone call, Victor," the man said.

"Really? I'm not taking any to-

day. How about a cold beer, Arturo?"

"Thanks, but you'd better answer that call. It's from police headquarters."

"My day off," Fiala said. "I'm not talking to headquarters."

"Not even to Lopez?"

Fiala sat up frowning. "The Chief's on the wire?"

"That's right. He's hanging on."

Trouble. That means real trouble, Fiala told himself, rising from his chair. "Keep an eye on the boy," he said to Arturo. "Don't let him climb the tree."

A minute later he picked up the phone in Arturo's house. "Hello, Fiala speaking."

"It's about time," Lopez said over the wire. "What's wrong that you don't answer your own phone?"

"It's out of commission."

"Perhaps you didn't pay your bill."

"I always pay them, and on time," Fiala snapped.

"Very good. Now I have a favor to ask."

"What kind?" Fiala said suspiciously.

"I want you to work on a special assignment."

"Today?"

"I'm aware that you're off duty," Lopez said icily. "I mean today."

"No one else can take care of the

matter?" He knew the answer.

"No one. I'm at my office. May I expect your presence?"

"Yes." The reply was hesitant, barely audible, but as soon as Lopez hung up, Fiala banged down the phone and bellowed, "May I expect your presence? Oh, you're a cute one, Lopez, with your fancy tongue."

"Bad news?" Arturo said as Fiala entered the patio and came toward him.

"A special assignment and on my day off."

"It must be a serious matter."

"Serious or not, there are others on the force, but Lopez wants me, and in this heat." Fiala shook his head and spied the bottle of beer his grandson had brought him. "Put it back in the refrigerator," he said to the boy. "I couldn't enjoy it now. Ah, Lopez put his spurs into me again."

"Relax," said Arturo. "Getting angry won't help."

"I know. It's too hot," Fiala answered and went into the house. He stepped from it again with his jacket on his arm and a bottle of beer in his hand. "On second thought, I'd better top this one off," he said, winking at Arturo.

Ten minutes later Fiala stepped from his car at the Municipal Building and entered its patio. On the balcony stairs a glum-faced police-

man all but knocked him down, then apologized and said, "If you're going up to see the Chief, you'd better change your plans. The heat's got him; he's fit to be tied."

"When isn't he?" Fiala replied, and continued climbing. He frowned when he reached the Chief's door, knocked lightly and it flew open before him. Ordinarily Lopez' face was ghastly pale; now it was flushed and his eyes glinted with anger. He looked as if he were about to explode, and Fiala readied himself, but the explosion never came.

"Oh, it's you," Lopez said softly. "Come in."

Fiala stepped into the office, and Lopez went to a window that faced the street and stared out, obviously at nothing, for he was muttering in conversation with himself. Finally he swung around and went to his desk. "Do you know what happened?" he said, smashing its gleaming surface with his fist.

Fiala shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I haven't the least idea."

"That's fine. Now why are you standing? Sit down."

*Ai, the heat's got him,* Fiala thought, finding a chair. He was in need of a smoke, but thought better of lighting up. Lopez struck the desk again. "Listen to this, Victor," he said, spitting out the words. "No, wait a moment. What

position do I hold in the city of Montes?"

Fiala brushed his chin with the back of his hand and sent Lopez a curious side glance. He's really in bad shape, he thought, and gave his answer, "You're the Chief of Police."

"An important position?"

"Yes."

"And people look up to me?"

"Certainly."

"They expect me to keep their city free of crime. No?"

Fiala nodded, wondering where all this was leading. "Now," Lopez went on, "what do you suppose the people would think if a thief got into my house and made off with all my silverware?"

For the moment, Fiala didn't believe his ears. Lopez robbed! He wanted to laugh and was barely able to restrain himself. "Someone took all your silverware?" he said.

"All of the finest pieces."

"Terrible," said Fiala, still wanting to laugh.

"You understand my predicament, I hope," said Lopez. "If word of this gets around, the whole city will be laughing."

*Howling*, thought Fiala.

Lopez continued, "That's why I called you. I want the silverware back, and I want the thief. You're relieved of all other duties, Victor, till you clear the matter up. One

more thing, you're to keep this to yourself."

Fiala nodded. "I understand. Now if I may ask a question. Do you suspect any of the servants?"

"Certainly not. They've been with me too long."

"Have you any theory concerning the theft?"

"None whatever, and that's what galls me. Oh, but if I knew who it was. . . ."

Frowning, Fiala rose from his chair. Already he saw difficulties of a peculiar nature. Silverware. Who would steal it from Lopez, and what would he do with it? "Nothing else was taken from the house?" he asked.

"That's just it. There was money and my wife's jewelry lying around, and none was touched."

*Odd*, Fiala thought. "I'll do my best," he said to Lopez, "but . . ."

"But what?"

"Never mind." Fiala turned and started for the door.

Even in the shadow of the arcade it was hot, and beyond it in the gutter and across the small plaza a fierce light burned. No one sat in the plaza. For once, it was absolutely deserted. Fiala gazed across it toward the Blue Diamond restaurant. Finally and reluctantly he stepped from the shadow of the arcade and made his way slowly across the plaza and into the res-

taurant. It was no cooler there.

"Hot?" said the counterman.

Fiala nodded and asked for coffee, then looked around at the empty tables. The counterman returned with his coffee. "Has Domingo been in?" Fiala asked him.

"You mean has anyone been in. No, I haven't seen him."

Fiala nodded and lifted his cup, thinking of the stolen silverware. None of the servants would have taken it, and any local thief knew better than to touch it. An outsider? No, for the simple reason that the money and jewelry had been left behind. But why would anyone risk taking the silverware and leave the money and jewelry?

If I knew the answer to that one, he sighed, and finished his coffee. Rising, he went to the door. Beyond it the sun glittered in a mad dance, withering the green of the empty plaza. Utter silence out there, complete desolation. He thought of the coolness of his patio and shook his head. Oh, to be there now.

A movement of hot air brought him back to reality and he stepped out to the sidewalk. Four blocks away he entered another restaurant, asked for Domingo and was told he hadn't been in. Disappointed, he walked leisurely back to the plaza and sat on a bench in the deepest shade he could find.

Five minutes later Domingo sat down beside him. "You were looking for me, Senor?"

Fiala nodded and eyed him. Domingo appeared nervous, but then he always did. "I need information concerning some valuable silverware. What do you know?"

"Me?" Domingo tapped his thin chest. "I know nothing."

"In that case, you'd better find out something from your friends."

"About some silverware? They wouldn't touch anything like that. I know, Senor."

"You sound very sure."

"I am. Stuff like that is too hard to handle. My friends know better."

Domingo's protests were too fervid. Did he know something? "Then you haven't heard anything?" asked Fiala.

"Nothing at all." Domingo shrugged. "If I hear. . ."

"Something tells me you have already heard."

"Oh, no, Senor."

"Oh, yes. You're too jumpy. What is it you're afraid of?"

Silence. Domingo stared at the empty plaza while a painful expression crossed his face. Finally he spoke. "Remember," he said with concern, "I had nothing to do with the matter. I only heard about it."

"That's much better," said Fiala. "Now just what did you hear?"



"The silverware was stolen from the chief of police."

"That's right."

"And that's why no one would touch it. A fellow would have to be out of his mind."

"True," said Fiala, "but it so happens that someone did steal it—and I want his name."

"I don't know that, Senor."

"You're a liar. You know, but you're frightened of something and trying to cover."

"No, Senor."

"I'm losing patience. You're protecting someone and you're apt to regret it."

"All right," Domingo said. "Perhaps you won't believe this, but it was. . . ." Here his voice dropped as he revealed the name of the thief.

Fiala was stunned. "Oh, no!" he said. "He couldn't have done it."

"He did, Senor, and now you know."

"But why would he steal the silverware? It doesn't make sense."

"He's been gambling and losing. He had to pay his debts."

"A pretty story."

"You don't believe me?"

"Let's say I doubt you."

Domingo shrugged. "That's the story and it's straight."

Fiala shook his head. "It's hard to believe, and what if it ever gets around?"

"Now you can see why none of us would touch the silverware."

"Lopez wants it, and the skin of the thief."

"Ai, wait till he discovers who he is."

"That can't happen," Fiala said, shaking his head. "Not in a million years."

"Why not?"

"Because Lopez would probably kill him."

"Which is no skin off my back."

"I can't give his name."

"Then keep your mouth shut and forget about the matter."

"Impossible. I've got to do something."

"In that case, do what you have to do."

"It's not that simple. If I reveal the truth, nothing will be settled, and all sorts of complications are apt to arise."

"Do or don't, either way you hang, so let me out of this," Domingo said and started to rise, but Fiala held him back.

"About the silverware. Where is it?"

"I don't know. You'll have to make your own arrangements about that."

"No, you will, as an interested buyer."

"Me, Senor? I wouldn't touch the stuff for a million pesos."

"You'll make the contact," Fiala



said as if Domingo hadn't spoken. "As soon as you do, let me know."

"I don't like this at all," Domingo complained.

"Neither do I, but we're both stuck, so on your way."

Nodding, Domingo got up and walked off. A few minutes later Fiala arose from the bench and went slowly to his car.

Subdued music came from the Black Cat. Only two customers were in the place when Fiala entered it. He nodded to them and went to the bar where the owner was dozing.

"Pancho."

"Ah, Victor." Pancho shook his head. "A bad night last night. My head is ready to split."

"And a bad day for me," Fiala complained. "I've got to work, and in heat like this."

"What will it be? A small one?" Pancho produced bottle and glass and set them on the bar. "You look worried," he said.

"I am. Lopez put me on a tough one."

"Ah, Victor, sometimes I don't think he likes you."

"Nor himself," Fiala answered. He emptied the contents of the small bottle into his glass and started for a table in a dark corner. "If you will excuse me, Pancho. I have a few things to think about."

"As you wish, Victor."

The beer was cold, light, golden. Fiala tasted it and pushed back the glass. It might be hours before Domingo contacted him. In the meantime he could prepare himself for a difficult feat. If it worked, all to the good. If it didn't. . . . *I'll be done for*, he thought.

Two hours later he arose from the table. "I'm leaving," he said to Pancho. "If anyone is looking for me, send him to the house."

It was dark in the patio. Fiala sat under the avocado tree and shook his head. Late, and no word from Domingo. At nine, his grandson brought him a bite and a bottle of beer. At ten, his daughter asked if he were going to bed and he waved her off.

Quietly she went back into the house and he continued to wait. It was well past midnight when a knock sounded on the front door. He got to his feet and hurried to open it. A somber-faced boy handed him a note. Scanning it quickly, he said, "Let's go. Get in the car."

In an area off the dry bed of a river that skirted the city lay an area of darkness, ominous silence, and empty streets fronted by adobe houses. Many were untenanted and in complete ruin, others were close to that state. The car moved slowly, the boy watching. Finally he pointed. "That one, *Senor*."

The car moved on, turned the next corner and stopped. "Thanks. Better go home to bed now," Fiala said, pressing a five-peso note into the boy's hand.

The boy ran off and vanished in the dark. Fiala stepped from the car and studied the house which the boy had pointed out. It appeared deserted, but ten minutes later the door opened. A man stepped out, then another. Their voices drifted through the street, loud in violent argument, and faded as they walked away.

Early the next morning Lopez swung around in his chair at the knock on his door. "Come in," he snapped. Yesterday's mood was still on him. Fiala noted this as he entered the office.

"Well, what happened?"

Lopez' voice grated, and Fiala flinched. Another hot day was in the making, which was enough to contend with, much less the chief's temperament. Fiala raised his hand. "It's all taken care of," he said. "I've got back the silverware."

"And the thief?"

"I'm afraid he escaped."

Lopez' jaw moved, but not a word came from his mouth for some seconds. "I think you'd better explain," he finally said.

Fiala took a deep breath and began. "This is what happened. I made contact with a fence who

knew about the silverware. He was reluctant to talk, but I finally persuaded him, and he sent me to another fence. This fellow was more cooperative. Through a third party, he arranged a meeting with the thief. They met in an abandoned house. My contact looked over the silverware, refused to buy it and left. As he went out the door, I moved in." Here Fiala shrugged. "Unfortunately, the back door was open. The thief went out it like a light."

"Very bad, Victor."

"Yes, I know, but you have your silverware."

Lopez nodded and lifted the box of cigars on his desk. "Have one of these," he said, "and take two days off."

Twenty minutes later Fiala was home and sitting under the avocado tree. It was hot again, the sun burning the city, but in the patio it was cool. Slowly he unwrapped the cigar Lopez had given him and lit it, then called to his grandson to bring him a cold bottle of beer. It was his daughter who brought it.

"What are you celebrating?" she asked when she saw the cigar.

"Nothing in particular," he answered and smiled, thinking of what he had done, stolen back the silverware which Lopez' son had taken to pay off his gambling losses.

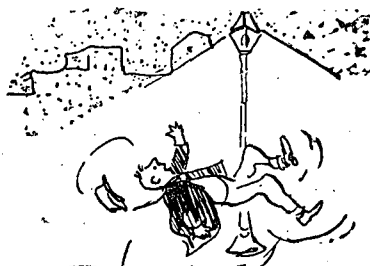
*A retentive memory may harbor a myriad of memorabilia, but one must be perspicacious, indeed, to utilize it advantageously.*

I FOUND Henry Raleigh in the Twilight Club. That was no trick; he always ate dinner at the Twilight Club. It had enough driftwood and bogus black marble to make a person like Henry Raleigh think he was living high, even if the most expensive sawdust on the menu went to \$4.75. He was with a girl, which was also predictable. But the girl wasn't. Henry Raleigh's girls usually had interesting, slightly overblown figures, and faces like the backs of catcher's mitts. This was definitely a doll baby. Her face had all the

his booth. "What's new with you?"

"Oh, hi, Lucky," said Henry. He jumped a little, and spilled some of his Manhattan. Then he introduced me to the dame. Very polite fellow, Henry.

"Could I speak to you a min-



# The DELINQUENT ACCOUNT

by Al Wright

character of those plaster beauties you win for knocking down all the milk bottles, but she was a doll baby, nevertheless.

"Hi, Henry," I said, stopping at

ute?" I asked. "Just a few words."

Henry looked uncomfortable. "Well, gee, Lucky. Could it wait, maybe? Could I . . ."

"It's very important, Henry."

Henry's sheeplike face looked put upon, but he excused himself and came with me. He towered

two heads taller than me, and I could hear him breathing indignantly up there. I led him downstairs to the men's room.

"What the . . . ?" Henry blasted. Then he saw Andy and shut up. Henry, big as he was, looked up a couple of inches to Andy, and Henry's matronly build was entirely different from Andy's cement barrel physique. Besides, Andy had obviously visited a better tailor.

"Henry," I said, "You owe me five hundred and seventy dollars."

"I *know* that, Lucky," Henry said, not at me but at Andy. "I told you that just as soon as I get a couple of things straightened out . . ."

"Andy," I said, "how much would you charge me to break Henry's nose?"

"Fifty dollars," Andy said.

"How much for blacking his eyes?"

"Ten dollars apiece."

"Suppose I wanted some teeth?"

"Seven-fifty each, and broken ones don't count."

"You see, Henry?" I said. "For approximately one hundred dollars I can have you beat up quite satisfactorily. And I'd still have four hundred and seventy dollars profit."

"But you know me, Lucky . . ."

"Henry, I've been holding your

marker for five hundred and seventy dollars for three months. And you don't even tell me a decent story. Now this morning I ran into Mel Considine. He says he bought your share of the Wildwood place for two thousand dollars." I held out my hand.

"That's already gone, Lucky. I've had a lot of expenses lately."

"You don't mind if I look?"

Henry's hand went automatically for his wallet, and Andy's fist hit him automatically on the shoulder. Henry said *ow* and massaged his dead arm. Andy handed me the wallet. It held thirty-seven dollars and Mel Considine's check for two thousand. I removed the check and put it into my wallet.

"Hey, you can't do that," Henry said, and suddenly his whine had turned almost to tears. "I need that. I've gotta . . ." He stopped. "That money's already spent."

"Tomorrow morning, Henry, Andy and I will meet you at ten o'clock at Harmon's on Thirteenth Street. We'll all go together to the bank and you will cash this check. You will then hand me five hundred and seventy dollars, keeping for yourself fourteen hundred and thirty dollars. Then we'll be friends again."

I started out.

"Wait a minute," Henry said.

"Listen, Lucky, I can get the mon-

ey for you—by the end of the week, for sure. But that check I gotta have. That's for something else. I really gotta have it."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Henry," I said, and kept walking. Andy followed me. Henry stayed in the men's room, at least until we were up the stairs and out of sight. I went outside and looked for a cab. Andy came up and I gave him twenty dollars.

"No," he said. "I didn't really do anything."

"You lent your immense presence," I said. "Let's keep it businesslike. Just be at Harmon's tomorrow morning at ten."

A cab stopped. "Where you going?" Andy said.

"To a bridge game."

"Bridge," Andy said in disgust. But I held fair cards and made fifty-seven dollars.

I was at Harmon's at nine fifty-five, with scrambled eggs and the Inquirer. At three past ten Andy showed up looking hungover. At ten-ten or thereabouts, I found out that Henry wasn't going to show. He made the first page of the last section, and got about three inches. No one had seen the hit-and-run car. His occupation was listed as house painter, which was something I'd never known about Henry. I showed it to Andy. He whistled.

"What the heck was Henry Raleigh doing in Wayne?" he asked.

"Maybe he was looking for houses that needed painting."

"Is the check signed?"

"No."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'll work fairly hard for five hundred and seventy dollars."

Andy asked could he help and I said no and he left—to go back to bed, I imagine.

I went to a drugstore and found myself a nice secluded phone booth. I called the police and got Gary Hobbs.

"You got one for me?" Gary was eager; he plays the horses.

"No, but I'll buy you lunch. At Jacque's. Whatever time's convenient."

"I'll be there. About noon?"

"Fine. There's a string."

"I know that, Lucky. What is it?"

"A mutual friend of ours passed away last night."

"What? Oh, you mean Henry Raleigh."

"Can you get a look at the medical report?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"Get a look."

Gary was early; he was halfway through a bourbon and ginger when I got there. We moved to a booth and talked about horses. I

don't like horses, myself, and I don't like to bet on them, unless I know something about one horse that the other horses don't know.

"What happened to your Garden State contact?" he asked me.

"He gave me a bad tip and I had him rubbed out," I said. "Did you get a look at the report on Henry?"

"Got hit from behind, looks like. One leg, pelvic area in several places. Skull crushed."

Gary looked at me. "It happens. Guy gets hit from behind, he bounces forward some. Maybe the driver doesn't realize anything till that instant. By the time he gets the car stopped he's run over the guy."

"This happens often?"

"I didn't say that. It happens. You know anything, Lucky, you better tell me."

"I know he owed me five hundred and seventy dollars," I told him.

"He owed other people too, I expect," said Gary.

I shrugged. "He was a determined, dedicated, talented loser. He probably owed one out of every three people he knew." The waiter came and we ordered, and Gary started talking about horses again. I got the impression that the Police Department was taking Hen-

ry Raleigh's departure with equanimity. Over coffee, Gary came after me again.

"Come on, Lucky," he said. "There must be one the boys have been hiding, that's about ready to break. Gimme a tip."

"Not today," I said.

I picked up the check and we said goodbye. Gary went back to questioning B-girls—he's on the vice squad—and I went to the phone booth.

A trick memory is useful, I would imagine, in many businesses; in mine, it's a hell of a nice cushion. Say we're playing gin rummy, you and me. I'll remember every card you've picked up, naturally. If you're a fair player, you'll remember mine, too. But will you remember all the ones I hesitated over? And suppose you know I'm cagey, will you remember which hesitations you think were fake? Will you recall how long, on the average, I'll try a pair of kings before I throw them off? What percentage of the time do I knock, with more than five after the sixth round? You get the idea. I can play a little dumber than you (I don't), take a few more chances (I might), and still be playing you even.

What I'm getting at is that I remembered the name of Henry Raleigh's date of the night before.

She was in the phone book, an apartment house within walking distance.

I stopped at the Pat Hand and bought two bottles of French champagne. Harley, the bartender, protested.

"You'll get me in trouble. You could get it just as well at the State Store."

"I need it iced, Harley. I'm in a hurry." I tipped him a buck, but he was still grumbling when I left.

Cynthia Del Mesa's apartment house was just going into a long, slow swan dive. In another five years it will have dirty words on the walls of the lobby. Right now, it's still shabby fancy.

The elevators are automatic and had been inspected, two months previously, by a man named Robert Antonides. It happens I know the little Greek, and my guess is that he paid some rummy two bucks to put in an appearance and fill out the papers, while he, Robert Antonides, shot nine ball at Porterfield's. Nevertheless, it was the only way to the ninth floor; I took it.

Cynthia came tiptoeing to the door when I knocked. I could hear the floor creaking. I knocked some more.

"Who is it?" Cynthia said, turning her back to the door to sound as if she were in the kitchen grind-

ing maize for dinner. What an act.

"It's Lucky Charles," I said. "May I see you a minute?"

There was a pause while she devised some schoolgirl strategy.

"Please," I said. "It will only take a minute. I know you must feel awful."

That gave her an attitude and a pose and she felt better.

"Just a minute," she said, and walked out to the kitchen and back. When she opened the door, I swear, she was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. I decided to play it big. I held out my arms and she fell into them, burying her head in my shoulder. By the time she came up for air, she'd squeezed out a few real tears. Remember, this dame had been introduced to me about seventeen hours previously. My guess was that she hadn't known Henry a lot longer. I guided her gently to the sofa. We sat down together. I found a pack of her cigarettes on an end table, offered her one and lit it.

"How long did you know Henry?" I asked.

"For years and years," she said. "Since we were kids."

She looked over at me and smiled wistfully. She was wearing something silky and peach-colored, and there was no doubt about it—she had a remarkable figure. And she had that clear, blank, beautiful

face. A broad white band around her hair made her look even younger.

I looked around the livingroom, which was very neat and well kept. It was even fairly, tastefully furnished.

"Funny how these things happen, isn't it?" I said. "Gee, just last night."

"Yeah," she said. "You never know," joining me in the deep philosophic resignation.

"What do you suppose he was doing out in Wayne?" I asked.

I didn't look at her, but I could feel her glance at me. "I don't know," she said. "I think maybe he had some relatives out there—cousins or something."

I held up the sack with the champagne. "Look," I said. "I was feeling lousy about old Henry, and I, well, I wanted somebody to feel lousy with. So I brought some champagne."

She just stared at me with her big blue plastic eyes.

"I know it seems funny," I said, "but you know Henry liked a good time, and I thought maybe he'd like it if we drank a little toast to him—in good imported champagne."

"Sure," she said. "Sure, that's a good idea. That's nice. I'll get some glasses."

"It's already cold," I said, "but

take one of the bottles and put it in the refrigerator."

I might have done just as well with a bottle of Scotch, but I doubt it. Champagne is a great little catalyst, especially with women. Give a woman a fifth of Scotch and she'll figure she had it coming to her. Give her a four-dollar bottle of champagne and you have a party on your hands.

When she came back, carrying a couple of martini glasses, there was even some expression on her face. We devoted about three more sentences to old Henry.

"Hey," I asked her, "did you read the Inquirer this morning?"

"I haven't got one. I used to have it delivered, but by the time I get up it's out of date. I get an afternoon paper."

I wondered if she had been in the car when they ran over Henry.

"Tell me, Cynthia, how did you know old Henry was dead?"

Her eyes showed white. "Why, I . . . It was on TV."

"There aren't any news programs after midnight."

"I meant the radio."

"Or how about you read it in the Inquirer, which you don't get?"

She got up and looked as indignant as a girl can. "You're not a cop," she said accusingly. "Henry said you were . . ."

"What did good old Henry say?"



"A tinhorn gambler," she said triumphantly.

"Henry was fond of Westerns, I guess."

"You get out of here." Then she came up and touched my sleeve. "Listen," she said, "we were going real good. I thought maybe I'd get a couple of steaks out of the freezer and we could, you know, have some dinner and a few drinks. We've got no reason to be mad."

"That's right," I said. "But you must realize that our only common bond was Henry Raleigh, and I doubt that either of us liked him very much."

"You can say that again," she said. "Well, how about it?"

"Let's do it another time, Cynthia." I kissed her and picked up my hat. "And don't worry. Like Henry said, I'm just a tinhorn gambler."

I left and walked down the hall, loud. Then I came back, softly. She was on the phone, of course, but I couldn't hear much through the door. It didn't matter, anyway.

It was evening rush hour, but I didn't really need a cab. It was only a few blocks to the Twilight Club, and I walked.

There were a few customers at the front of the bar, so I found a stool at the back. Steve brought me a Scotch and water, took care of some customers, and came back to

gossip while things were slow.

"Old Henry," he said.

"You suppose he ever painted a house in his life?" I said.

Steve snorted.

I spread a five-dollar bill on the counter. "I'm going to tell you a story, Steve, and if you listen well, it's worth this five bucks to me."

Steve's eyes narrowed.

"Last night, after Andy and I talked to Henry, he came back and sat there looking uncomfortable and glancing at the door. He couldn't even get much interested, I'll bet, in that chick, who was major league for old Henry the busher. He probably couldn't even eat, and for fat Henry that was a crisis."

Steve stared at me without moving.

"Then one of two people came in, and talked to him, probably sat down in the booth—on the side with the chick. Then they all left together. I'm going to say two names. When I say the right one, you pick up the five."

One of the customers called to Steve, but he didn't stir.

"Sal Scaldi."

Steve picked up the five. Then he held out his hand. "You owe me another five."

I just looked at him.

"Johnny Dwyer was with him. Wasn't that the other name?"

I gave him another five. It made it easier. Johnny Dwyer's brother has a garage.

Andy was at the Pat Hand, inhaling bourbon. He drinks triples. I told him what I wanted.

"Sure," he said. "If there's trouble, gimme fifty. If there isn't, it's on the house."

"No," I said, "if there's no trouble, it's still worth ten to me. I'm very breakable."

We took a cab to a corner a block from Dwyer's Repair and Service, and walked the rest of the way.

In the big room there were about a dozen cars, wheels off, hoods open, innards scattered. As we walked in, I glanced through a window to the office. All I could see were feet on a desk, feet in long, black, pointed shoes. There was only one mechanic on duty at that hour. You couldn't see much of him either. Most of him was under one of the cars. He didn't come out as we walked toward the back, but when he found that we weren't going to stand around clearing our throats and wait for him to tell us our car wasn't ready, he came wheeling out. We were past him, but I could hear the roller skate wheels whirr out.

"Yo," he said. It made a big echo. We didn't stop or turn. "Yo," he said louder, and then he started

running toward us at full speed.

We turned and Andy got set.

The mechanic stopped running when he turned, but continued to walk fast. He was a tall man, not heavy, but he looked wiry. He had a wrench. Behind him, the office door opened, and the pointed shoes came out, carrying a kid in a tight fitting dark suit. His hat was on the back of his head. He had a lot of black curly hair. Sometime in his life someone had let him have a good one—right on the nose. He sauntered toward us, heels clicking.

"You looking for somebody?" the mechanic asked.

"My car's being fixed," I told him. "I think it's in the back room."

"There ain't no cars back there," he said. "What kind of car was it?"

"Sixty-four sedan," I said. "Probably the grill was dented. Maybe a fender and a headlight."

"No car like that here."

The kid reached us. He was only something above a middleweight, but there seemed to be a lot of muscles under the suit. He had the coat buttoned. He stood and looked, squinting his eyes against the curling smoke from the cigarette he wore in his lips.

"I'm pretty sure it's back there," I said. "You don't mind if I look?"

"No cars in the back room," the

mechanic repeated. "Nothin', seel"

"Beat it," said the kid, and his right hand started toward his left shoulder. It had traveled perhaps two inches when Andy got him. Andy's hands are as big as most people's heads. He got the kid by the lapels, but I'm pretty sure he

had shirt and flesh, too. He simply lifted the kid off the floor about a yard and shook him, the way a dog shakes a rag. The kid couldn't get his hand into his coat, so he swung. He managed one glancing blow that Andy took without noticing. Then the kid began to



come apart. His hat, and then his shoes, flew off; the coat began to rip up the back. His head jerked violently back and forth, and he seemed to be trying to say something. The long hair flew like a concert pianist's at a recital. Andy had turned so that he could look over the kid's shoulder at the mechanic, who crouched slightly, and hefted the wrench, but didn't take a step.

Even when Andy let go of the kid, who bounced about a foot away from the mechanic's feet, he didn't move. The kid bounced once more and skidded halfway under one of the sick cars.

Andy looked at the other man.

"You ain't gonna do that to me," he said, wagging the wrench.

"You interested in eating that wrench," Andy asked him, "or are we gonna see the back room?"

"The back room," said the mechanic, "is all yours."

Andy jerked his head toward the back, but didn't look at me. "You go look, Lucky," he said. "I'll wait for you."

The car was there, all right. The fender was straightened and sanded, but the new paint hadn't been put on yet. The headlight had evidently been smashed, too, because it had been taken out.

When we left, the kid was still under the car, and the mechanic

was nudging him tentatively with a foot in the ribs.

We walked a couple of blocks before we found a cab. When we climbed in, I got out my wallet and handed Andy fifty bucks.

"I'll drop you at the Pat Hand," I said.

"Where you going?"

"To see Joe Gorgon."

"What for?"

"I'm going to get my five hundred and seventy dollars. What did you think?"

"You want me to go along?"

"Andy, do you really figure you could wade through everybody who works for Joe Gorgon, guns and all? No, you've been of great service, but now I'm safer by myself. Nobody ever thinks I'm going to hurt him."

Usually, the big villain is supposed to be found in the plush back office of a night club. Joe Gorgon owns some night clubs, but I've never heard of him going to one. He works out of a real estate office on the south side, and he works late. He's a very busy man. Actually, I'd never met him, but everyone knows the place and knows what a busy man he is.

It's a nice enough building—comfortable, but not pretentious. The first floor was dark, but I pushed a buzzer and after about a minute Johnny Dwyer appeared.

"Whatchu want here, punk?"

"I want to see Joe Gorgon. I've got something for him."

Johnny held out a hand. "I'll give it to him."

"Just tell him, Johnny."

He considered it, but he'd seen me with Andy, so he decided against clobbering me. He went away and came back in only a couple of minutes, surprised. "He'll see you, punk."

The office, like the building, was comfortable, but not gaudy. Joe Gorgon I had seen before, from a distance. He looked tired and middle-aged and respectable.

Johnny Dwyer escorted me in and slumped into a chair. Joe Gorgon stood up and shook my hand.

"I've heard of you, Lucky Charles," he said. "I hear you hold good cards."

"Sometimes, Mr. Gorgon," I said. I looked at Johnny. "Mr. Gorgon, I've got more than twenty years on you, but I figure you could probably take me without steaming up your glasses." I opened my coat. "I don't carry anything. Could we talk alone?"

He laughed and waved, and Johnny Dwyer left.

Joe Gorgon fixed us a drink—without asking. Bourbon from a bottle in the desk, ice from a refrigerator, water from the tap. He talked as he worked.

"You see me here, nine o'clock at night, still working? No dinner. No lunch except a lousy sandwich from the delly. No wonder I got a bad stomach. Here's health, Lucky. What can I do for you?"

I took out the check for two thousand dollars for Henry Raleigh and Henry's IOU to me for five-seventy and laid them on the desk. Joe Gorgon looked at them.

"So?"

"The check's no good to me. It's not signed. I thought you might know some way it could *be* signed—by proxy, sort of. Henry really had it in mind to pay you, I'm sure."

"And you want your five-seventy, I take it?"

"I'll settle for five, just to keep it in round numbers."

He sat staring into the air for a moment, fanning himself idly with old Henry's check. Then he grunted, took a green box out of a desk drawer, and counted me out five one hundred dollar bills.

"I'll keep the seventy for the bookkeeping this'll take," he said. You can see how he got rich.

"Thank you, Mr. Gorgon." I drained my glass and stood up. "I won't keep you. I know you're busy."

"Sit down," he said. "Were you just guessing, or were there some mistakes?"

"There were too many mistakes."

"If you could find 'em, a cop could find 'em."

"A smart cop might," I said. "But they wouldn't hold up in court."

"Tell me."

"The girl was too good looking—out of Henry's class. She had to be setting him up. There were witnesses when the boys gathered him in. And a pro like Johnny would know better than to use his own car, I'd think."

"That stupid . . . I told him . . ." Joe Gorgon stopped and sighed. "Okay, Lucky Charles. It's been nice doing business with you."

I got up and went to the door.

"How'd you like to play poker some night, Lucky?"

"Just give some notice, Mr. Gorgon; so I can get up a stake. I understand you play pretty rough."

"Yeah," he said, and forgot me.

The next day I called Cynthia and told her to keep her mouth shut and she was home free. She invited me up for those steaks, and I didn't have anything better to do

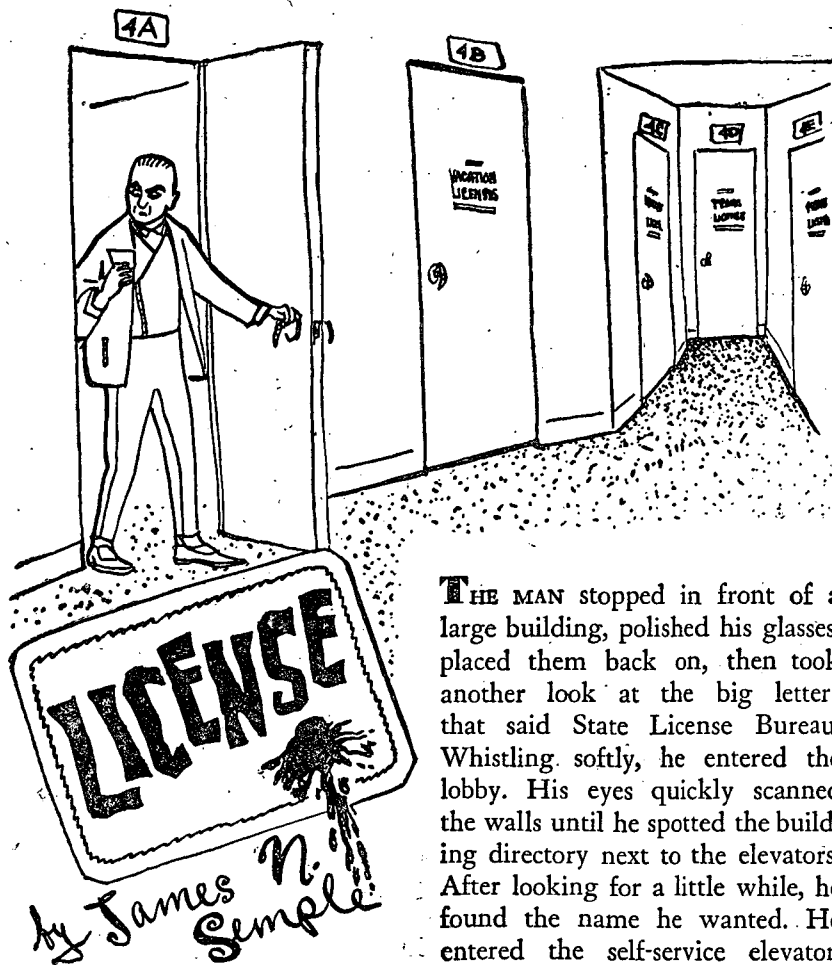
so I went, carrying two bottles of champagne, a domestic brand this time. The kid in the garage, I hear, had a broken arm and a dislocated shoulder. Johnny Dwyer came back on the scene in about a week. He still wore a band aid here and there.

It wasn't exactly an eye for an eye, I'll give you that. But Henry Raleigh was a fink and a welcher, and I can't honestly say I've missed him. And Johnny Dwyer's career as a rising young hoodlum suffered a serious setback, so he didn't get away clear. Joe Gorgon? Well, there's not much I can do about Joe Gorgon. The whole city police force can't touch him—or they don't want to touch him. And although the Feds keep circling, they don't seem to get any closer.

You can take care of Joe Gorgon, if you like. Think about him the next time you drop a fin into a football pool, or pay a buck for a "membership" in a phony after-hours club, or lean on your committeeman to fix a traffic ticket. Joe Gorgon's right in your hands, baby-cakes.



*In this bureaucratic age, I deem it exigent to assure the reader that the following is presented merely as an anecdote.*



**T**HE MAN stopped in front of a large building, polished his glasses, placed them back on, then took another look at the big letters that said State License Bureau. Whistling softly, he entered the lobby. His eyes quickly scanned the walls until he spotted the building directory next to the elevators. After looking for a little while, he found the name he wanted. He entered the self-service elevator, pushed the fourth floor button and

braced himself for the two-second ride.

Leaving the elevator, he turned to the right. The first door he came to was lettered 4B-Vacation Licenses. The next door said 4C-Marriage Licenses. Deciding that he was headed in the wrong direction, he turned around and walked back past the elevators, to a door numbered 4A. This was the one he wanted.

The man opened the door and stepped into the office. There was not too much activity going on since it was quite early in the morning. There were only two people applying for licenses, and only the cashier and one man at the desk were at work.

As the tall man waited, he looked around the brilliantly furnished room, and couldn't help but wonder why so much money was put into these government agencies. *As long as the boys in the government are happy, that's the important thing*, he thought.

Finally, he found himself at the desk, ready to do some business. The clerk was a good-looking man in his middle forties, with a small grey mustache and a thick crop of greying hair. The sign on his desk indicated he was Mr. Tolar. As the tall man approached him, he gave his practiced smile and asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I'd like a license to kill, please."

"Certainly," Tolar said. "Would you mind answering a few questions?"

"Not at all."

"Name and address?"

"Harold Spencer," came the bored reply. "1642 North Madison."

"Date?"

"April 25, 1992," he answered with some annoyance.

"No, no. I mean, on what date do you wish to kill?"

"Oh, I see," the tall man said. "Well, I'm not really too sure. Sometime between tomorrow and next Tuesday, I guess."

"In that case you'll want a seven-day license, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'm not too familiar with the different types. In fact, I didn't know there was more than one kind."

"Oh yes," Tolar declared with a frown. "There's also the yearly one, and a special three-day unlimited one that just went into effect this year."

"No kidding? Unlimited, eh? Good idea."

"Who is the victim?" Tolar asked quickly as he noticed two people just coming in the door.

"Mr. James Serval of 4537 Ryan Drive, in Lawn Crest."

"I see," Tolar went on. "Would

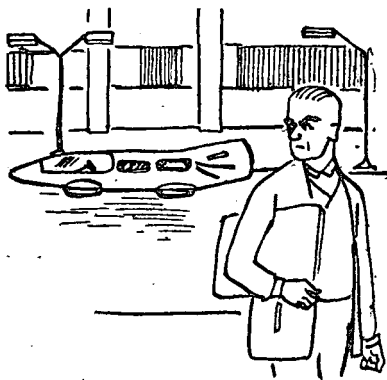


you tell me briefly why you wish to kill Mr. Servat?"

"Of course. We work together, and every day for the last week and a half he's been taking my parking space. Yesterday I decided I was tired of going down the block to park."

"Okay, Mr. Spencer. Now if you'll tell me your tentative means of killing him?"

"Gee, I hadn't decided for sure



yet. It's between shooting or strangling, if I can list two."

"Fine, fine, it's by no means binding. Just for the records, you know."

"Sure," the tall man said. "I understand."

"Alright, Mr. Spencer, if you'll sign here, I'll put the governor's seal on it, and all you'll need is the cashier's signature."

"Fine," said Spencer as he signed.

"A word of warning, Mr. Spencer. You have from midnight to-

night until one week from then. If you haven't done it by that time, you'll need another license. Don't do it on an expired license. One fellow waited until two days after the expiration date, and when he was arrested, the judge fined him two hundred dollars. Shows how important that little card is, eh?"

"How about that?" Spencer said in amazement. "Two hundred bucks!" He picked up the paper and walked across the room to the cashier's desk.

The cashier was an old man who had probably worked in this very department for years. He smiled at Spencer and took the five-dollar note that was handed to him. After quickly scanning the application, he scrawled his signature on the card and handed it back to Spencer.

"Thanks a lot." Spencer turned to go. "Wait a minute, can you tell me where I can get my fishing license? I'm thinking of a little trip."

"Fishing Licenses are on the second floor, room B," the old man told him. "But if you take a trip, don't forget to get a Traveler's License, and you may need a Vacation License too."

"Forgot about that. I appreciate your reminding me." He walked over to the door. "Good-bye."

"So long," the old man said. He watched Spencer go out and thought maybe it was time for him to see about getting a Vacation License himself.

Three days later, the old man was at his desk. The only other person in the room was Mr. Tolar. The early morning had brought few customers. Tolar was reading a newspaper; the old man was cleaning his desk. All of a sudden, Tolar started at something he read. He lowered the paper and spoke to the old man.

"Say, do you remember a guy named Harold Spencer? Came in here the other day to buy a seven-day license?"

"Oh, yeah," the old man replied after he thought for a few seconds. "Big guy with glasses. Real nice fellow, said he was going fishing.

What about him? What did he do?"

"Says here he was arrested for smoking a cigarette in the wash-room at the city building."

"No kidding," came the old man's disbelieving answer. "Man, you can't do that! I thought he was a pretty nice guy."

"Never can tell," observed Tolar. "Says there's a slim chance he might get off with life imprisonment underground."

"He ought to be executed," the old man said angrily.

"Well, I'm a lenient man myself," said Tolar, "but I'm with you there. We can't have that kind of thing going on."

"What kind of people are we getting to be?" the old man growled.

Tolar said nothing, but he shook his head slowly in bewilderment.

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Dear Fans:

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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

*Talent is believed to be innate in man but, Lowell tells us,  
"Genius is that in whose power one is."*



# ACTOR'S SHOWCASE

by  
Bryce Walton

**W**HEN I got to my bungalow-office that morning in the deep hand-sprinkled, artificial green of Beverly Hills, Wade was already there waiting for me, just sitting there waiting on the steps with a horrible kind of patience. Yes, I mean *the* Wade Manvell. The sight of him there in the sun like a gloomy clot

made a warning ting-a-ling of nerves in my stomach. An egocentric actor, faced with the threat of not making it up the glory road, is liable to do anything.

He had a beard stubble this morning and his long blond hair hadn't been washed. That bony, off-center face had a pale wild look, and I had to tell him that as far as I was concerned he had rung up no-sale.

"Well, you're out early," I said. It was ten-thirty a.m.

"Skip the formalities, please, Max," Wade said and stood up like he had the old man of the mountain on his back. "I'm beat and need a drink of your whiskey. I had to walk darn near all the way before some nut gave me a lift. Wasn't going to let me out of the car unless I promised to pray three times a day."

"Where's your cycle?" I asked as I unlocked the door and motioned Wade in.

"Had to hock it."

He was so flat he hadn't even been able to afford bus fare. I sat him down and poured him a drink, then I began fussing around with this and that, stalling, adjusting the Venetian blind and then the air conditioner.

Finally Wade spoke. "Stop suffering, Max. I'll make it easier for you. You don't have anything for me.

You asked me out here to tell me goodbye."

I had to admit it. He had made it easier, a little, but not much. I really liked the guy and wouldn't have taken him on as a client unless I'd thought he had some real good stuff. I'd seen him doing those free Shakespeare-in-the-park things in New York and he had a real artist's core of talent. I'd told him that. Now I told him again.

"I can't sell you, Wade. No one will buy."

His face was pale as he nodded, then looked at the rug.

"Go back to New York," I said. "You're wasting time and a fine talent here. It's different here right now. For commercial TV and most movies, they're looking for a certain kind of balanced homespun face everybody can identify with. You're too far out, Wade. Too unique. I mean it. Has nothing to do with talent. A very talented guy can be saleable but it doesn't necessarily work the other way. And I can't sell you."

He looked up at me suddenly and startled me. His eyes had taken on the wild glow of some obsessed anarchist. "Not me, Max. You can't go back anywhere as a failure." He rubbed his stubbly jaw. "Go back as a failure and you're dead all round. I'm staying here until I make it, or you get 17% of a corpse."

"Well I've done all I know how to do," I said.

"I know that, Max. But now I'm going to make myself saleable. I'm going to be sold. I'm going to get a lot of publicity, I'm going to become *known*. I'm going to get a big pad with a pool up in the hills and entertain the right people and open the right doors. But I need loot, Max. Lots and lots of loot. I need a pile of green up to here. Enough to pay for that pad for a year, at least, in advance, enough for all the publicity and pictures and steady mention in the right places. I need enough loot to put myself up in a perfect package, Max. A package that'll make me as saleable as Coca Cola."

"You need bread," I agreed, "or you're like Samson without hair."

"With that approach, Max, I know I can make it another year."

"Wishing is for kids," I said.

"I'm not wishing," Wade said with a shivery intensity. "I'm getting it, and I'm getting it this afternoon. All of it. I can't take bits or walk-ons or dubbing jobs, Max. I can't wash dishes and like that. I'm not going down; I'm going on up in the prettiest most saleable package you ever saw. All I need is a sudden small fortune."

"The horses?" I said. "Vegas?"

He stood up and said with a frighteningly solemn sincerity, "No,

Max. I'm going to rob a bank."

Well, I laughed. Of course I laughed. And then suddenly I stopped laughing. I'm often bothered by seriousness; now it nearly paralyzed me. I didn't think Wade was, but I said it.

"You're kidding," I said.

He jerked a vicious black-glinting revolver from his inside jacket pocket, squeezed the trigger. The shot roared and smoked. Then he broke it open. It was a phony he'd picked up from a friend who did Westerns. "Good bluff. They'll buy it."

"A bank guard won't be using blanks," I said, trying to laugh again. "Anyway, stop kidding." I poured him another drink. "Simmer down, and I'll drive you somewhere."

He shook his head. "How else can I get hold of a real stake without compromising my position as a professional actor? It's the only way for me, Max. It's all planned. I've cased the place. I know just how to do it. It'll be easy for me. I've rehearsed the scene many times, Max, and it's just the right part for me. I can really *act* it, Max. That teller won't have any doubt about my meaning business."

I argued and tried to get him plastered, but he wouldn't take another drink. At the same time I told myself he wouldn't go

through with any such stupid thing as robbing a bank. Or would he? Actors are an unpredictable lot generally. And Wade Manvell was a way-out talented kook in particular. He went to the door and said, "Wish me luck, Max?"

"Wishing is for kids," I said. Then, desperately, I added, "You're selling out. Buck fever hath thee in thrall. The *belle dame sans merci* whose charm of cash has destroyed the finest talents of the East has seduced you at last. You have succumbed to this jerry-built land of monied, illiterate vulgarians . . ."

It wouldn't work. The satire and hip approach was no good. Wade was deadly serious. So I went over and pushed a few bills into his jacket pocket. "You'll need getaway money," I said lamely.

"You'll get your 17% of the take, Max," he said softly. "As my agent, you're always going to get that 17% of me. You've put out a lot for me for two years and all you ever got out of it was a bigger phone bill."

"You've got to figure all of it as a gamble," I said, "or you're a gone gosling." But the door slammed and Wade was gone, out into the bright white California sunlight and dissolving up the street like a mirage. Only he was real. Whirligig unrealities are the norm and therefore real in this dream-scheme

oasis, this topsy-turvy wonderland.

I started to pick up the phone receiver. Instead, I poured myself a drink. I still didn't admit to myself that Wade would really try to knock over a bank, but I knew he was desperate. Still, I couldn't call the cops and say, "I got a friend may do something desperate and you have to watch out for him." Even if cops could be spared to watch over all desperate, last-ditch wayfarers, there wouldn't be nearly enough cops to go around. Besides which, I don't betray confidences, regardless of source, and most of my friends and acquaintances are kooks. In any case, whatever Wade wanted to do was his business, even if it was felony—I kept telling myself.

That was around 11 a.m. The rest of that day was accumulative agony. I couldn't concentrate on the sale of human flesh. I shut up shop and went to a cool, clean little local bar where I sat in the corner and let the golden stuff very slowly trickle into me—just enough to blunt the pain and the guilt of my conscience, but never quite enough to get me googled. I really liked Manvell. He was genuine in an ersatz world of images and pseudo-events. Even his wild kookiness was real, not an image he'd worked up to make himself saleable. He hadn't believed in that. Now it

made me sad and not a little bitter to think of Wade selling out. It's always nice to believe there's someone who won't. Then there's always this sneaky little feeling of being glad when they do. And I guess that made me feel guilty and depressed.

By this time, you see, I figured Wade very probably *was* capable of going out there somewhere in bug-town and knocking over a bank. The guilt increased. Had I really done all I could to open doors for Wade? Was it really my fault maybe? If I'd only worked a little harder, pushed a little more, maybe he wouldn't be out there cutting his throat. And I could have tried harder to stop him. Then that sneaking suspicion came back that I had secretly wanted him to do it, sell out, no matter if he ended up doing life. Maybe I welcomed his permanent departure from my grubby flesh-peddling milieu. Having real talent around that you can't sell makes everything seedier and more depressing, especially when you think of how you're selling pre-packaged images right and left—selling phoney reputations and lies and half-truths made into saleable images. Like this girl client of mine made a million dollars last year as a famous actress—and she's never made a movie yet. Her image as a great actress has been

sold, and she makes a mint posing with cigarettes and endorsing lipstick.

Later I tried to watch a ball game or something on the TV over the bar, but I got a bad headache. I decided to check my office out, then head for a steam bath and swim. When I stepped into my bungalow, the sun had just gone down and my phone was ringing.

I picked up the receiver. "Yes," I said. An imperious accented voice, very cool and arrogant, said, "Max Eastland? Actor's Agent?"

"Right," I said.

"This is me here—Alfredo Luchesi Bonannino!"

I turned into a pillar of salt. I had learned, on cue in a second, to ascend to the highest plateaus of moonstruck superlative where the studio officials love and sing. But the living voice of Alfredo Luchesi Bonannino! He was the greatest of all the international independent movie directors and producers. He still is, of course. I don't need to tell you about Bonannino. When great stars can shine no brighter, they fight for the prestige of being immortalized by the name and camera of Bonannino. He is the awe of art critics, and at the same time millions of Popcorn Joes make every one of his ambiguous flicks a box office smash.

"You there, Mr. Eastland?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, Mr. Bonannino."

"I stay at 139070 El Pasea Drive in Beverly Hills not so far from your pad. Get over here at once, now, run, fly! I want to talk over the business."

He hung up. I didn't waste time trying to figure out what was the business. Who questions a command performance?

I was passed through several hands and many rooms of one of those crazy colonial-type mansions off Beverly Drive, and finally was shown into a private projection room. Bonannino sat alone with a beer can. He was looking at a blank screen. He wore a white terrycloth robe and looked like a huge ripe olive with eyes.

"Sit down, Eastland. Hurry and sit down," he said. I sat in a reclining chair facing the screen. "This is a blowup of a television tape projection. Had it sent over from CBS television studios, re-taped from the four o'clock newcast this afternoon." He turned and yelled and waved his hand at technicians hiding somewhere. "*Ripetal! Ripetal!*"

The lights went out. The news came on the screen. After the commercial went in one ear and out the other, I looked pityingly at a poor announcer. He seemed miserably hot in tie and jacket, as if his need for a tall drink was even

greater than mine. Then his crisply-spoken chatter began to register.

"... in the nearly three o'clock quiet before the closing rush hour at Golden State Trust Bank this afternoon. And we pause now—we pause to let the entire network join us to see a modern bank robbery—*just as it happens!*"

After an instant of blankness, the picture came on. It was silent of course. The people in the bank looked small at first, then they became larger until closeups were clearly visible, and it was all so clear. The bank's interior had a shining cleanliness, a business-like sharpness that made it more real than a movie set.

A voice said with rising dramatic intensity, "This is actually happening, folks. Watch the man at the teller's window to the right of the screen—the man in light jacket and dark slacks. There is only one other customer in view, a woman. In the office space behind the tellers, you can see clerks and accountants busy at their jobs. Hidden camera eyes are silently watching, recording.

"The man in the light jacket is the bank robber. He has just passed a note to the teller saying, 'Put all the money there in this sack or I'll shoot you and anybody else I can. I'm desperate, and have nothing to lose.' The teller reads the note, starts to fill the sack as ordered.



Now that other teller, three windows to the left, see—he has noticed what is happening and is stepping on his alarm button. But no action is taken by the bank guards. The point is to identify and trail the robber. And, if possible, capture him away from the bank, away from innocent bystanders who might be fatally injured. Now! Now watch the robber in the background!"



The poor devil turned, ran straight toward the camera. They evidently have a number of hidden cameras set up in those banks to take pictures of unsuspecting felons at work. It gets the robber from all angles. There he was, turning this way and that, tortured, uncertain, bitter, terrified, cynical, everything going. They had magnified that tape until it had everything, including medium two-and-three shots and very revealing close shots, and angles that even Bonannino seemed to appreciate. He shouted. The lights came on again. Bonannino drained his beer can and wiped his face. He beamed.

"Television cameras in banks. When the alarm button is pressed, the cameras automatically start working. The tape is made. Immediately the tape is sent to television studios and sent out to television sets all over the country. Millions see it. Someone who knows the identity of the robber is bound to see the telecast and report his identity. He doesn't have a prayer. All sorts of mug-shots, right? Go out to everybody. Ingenious. What entertainment! What is real, what is fiction? Ha, ha!"

He turned very serious then. "That robber is your client. Wade—something or other?"

"Manvell," I said. "How did you know?"

"I always watch television newscasts for talent. I see this tape of the robbery from bank. I run over to TV studio at once, see it over and over, have it sent over here. I tell cops to call me if they find out who the robber is. They call. Seems he was identified by the girl clerk at Unemployment Compensation Office. Here, I believe it is called the Actor's Lounge. Anyway, she remembered this Wade Manvell clearly. Evidently he spent a lot of time there. So I check Actor's Equity, find out you are his agent. I call you."

"So," I said, "it is a good show, right?"

"Magnificent! You know that's how I pick up all of my greatest actors, Eastland. Many of them have no previous experience. Natural. Professionals I sometimes use by making them forget everything they ever learned and starting from the primitive bottom. But I get all good talent from newsreels, documentaries, faces in the crowds. And there—that Manvell, a natural! Greatest face for tragedy I have ever seen! Such intensity of emo-

tion, all genuine—it can always be brought out of such a face, such a soul as that! I must have him for my next picture, *Death in Venice*. We sign him up now, now! Name your price, please, name it now. What a screen test!"

"But he's a criminal now," I said. "It's too late. If he isn't picked up now, he soon will be."

"Forget it!" Bonannino yelled. He threw his empty beer can against the wall. "It is all—what you say here—fixed? All fixed. He get away with no money, and nobody hurt. There are no formal charges. The bank forgets everything. Just a gag, a joke, understand? I fix everything with bank."

"What?" I said.

"This bank he try to rob, she is branch of the big Giannini Bank of California. They help finance my picture, seel!" Bonannino laughed. "So I talk to them, they fix everything. You understand, this boy of yours is worth one, maybe two million bucks now!"

I understood perfectly. We made out the contracts and I ran out to join the search for Wade Manvell.



*Though it be wiser to lie low, the guilty often court surcease  
from misery via restlessness.*



**W**HEN Wint Marshall heard the sound, distant and faint though it was, he knew it was a shot. Had he been expecting it? Or hoping for it?

"Wint, what was that?" asked his wife Vivian, at the opposite end of the long dining table, serene, cool.

"I don't know."

He lied. He *knew*. That had been a shot.

"Really, darling, it sounded al-



# MURDER ME GENTLY

A NOVELETTE *by* C. B. GILFORD

most like a gunshot." Her gray eyes glittered in the candlelight. "Phil, Harriet, didn't that sound like a shot to you?" She had turned to their dinner guests, the Jennings.

He knew the sound had been a shot. He knew from what direction it had come.

"Wint darling, it must have come from the Listers'." Her lips, only her lips, smiled. "Do you suppose they're shooting at each other?"

He closed his eyes, conscious of the hard knot of fear in his stomach. He closed his eyes, and there it all was.

Diana Lister had lived in that sprawling ranch bungalow next door almost a year before he became involved with her. The Listers had a pool, and in the summer Diana spent most of her time in it and beside it. There were pool parties, there was the noise of them coming across the hedge, and twice he and Vivian were invited. He liked Diana's figure on those occasions, and the direct glances she gave him. It might be interesting, it occurred to him, to try to discover the meaning of those glances.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the whole affair was the curious little problem presented by Diana's being a next-door neighbor.

It was a kind of sport to elude Vivian's observation, to deceive her, merely to enjoy the deception.

What really began it was the phone call, on a rainy Saturday. On sunny Saturdays he usually played golf. Perhaps Diana knew that much of his habits. Perhaps she knew too that Vivian's car had just swept out of the driveway. But she asked for Vivian.

"My wife's gone to some bazaar or other," he told her.

Then there was a silence.

"I guess we're both left in the lurch today," she said finally. "Howard had to go to California this morning."

He smiled, congratulating himself. His patience had paid off. She had taken the initiative. Now he waited, forcing her to make the complete invitation.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked.

"Sounds good," he admitted casually.

"It's brewing right now. Why don't you come over?"

"All right."

"You can come through the garage. It's a shortcut."

He left his own house via the small door in the garage. He noticed how the trees and shrubbery concealed him almost completely if he didn't go down the driveway to the street, but if instead he



dodged through a gap in the hedge. Wet leaves dampened his sport jacket. Another few steps—it was amazing, how dense was the screen of foliage in the Lister yard also—and he came to the small door in the Lister garage.

He hesitated there, savoring the enticement, the temptation, the risk. Then he went in.

Diana was in the kitchen. She was wearing slacks and a full blouse, neat, well done, attractive, nothing obvious but more than was necessary for a last-minute coffee date.

In the livingroom, at far opposite ends of the sofa, they somehow became quickly confidential. "Vivian keeps busy, doesn't she?" Diana began.

"She's the active clubwoman type."

"Not the homemaker?"

"Our part-time maid seems to be adequate for most of that."

"She would have been a perfect mate for Howard."

"What do you mean?"

"He's away so much. Out of town. He doesn't make many demands."

Their eyes met in a long, frank look. It was just a matter of time, of preliminaries, of amenities. They were both civilized people . . .

"Wint darling," Vivian said

across the dining table, "aren't you the least bit curious about that noise?"

"No!"

He'd blurted the answer too quickly. Vivian's eyebrows raised almost imperceptibly. Unable to meet her gaze, he stabbed at the slice of roast on his plate, sawed viciously at it with his knife. But both his hands were trembling, and she must have noticed. She noticed everything. He mustn't give the show away now, having deceived her so successfully all these months.

"Doesn't Vivian know a thing about us?" Diana had asked. It wasn't a new question. Diana had an almost morbid curiosity about everything concerning his wife.

"I told you," he answered, trying to be patient, "that Vivian is far too busy with all her own little activities."

They were having dinner at Leon's, the kind of place which neither Vivian nor any of her friends would ever possibly frequent. Howard was safe in Chicago. In fact, the setup was very cozy, absolutely nothing to complain about. If Diana would only leave it at that. He never nagged her about Howard.

"I just can't understand," Diana persisted, "how a woman can have

an unfaithful husband and not sense something, not suspect at least."

"Is Howard always true blue on these long business trips of his?"

"Absolutely." She said it with utter finality.

"How can you be so sure?"

She shrugged her almost bare shoulders. "He loves me."

He speculated upon that proposition for a moment, while Diana sipped at her martini. She was delectable. Physically, that is, with her honey-blond hair, her richly textured, flawless skin, and all of her always so fresh, fragrant.

But at the same time she was shallow, sometimes he thought almost stupid. He had discerned that rather quickly in their relationship. But then how many women could be expected to be physically satisfying and clever besides? Now Vivian was clever. Intelligent.

Howard Lister probably did love this pretty wife of his. Howard was an oaf. Hard-working, ambitious, a very dull sort, but he was capable of loving Diana, of giving her the full measure of affection and devotion, and too dumb to imagine his wife would return him any less.

"When are you going to tell Vivian?" Diana asked suddenly.

"Tell her what?"

"About us, you and me," she said.

He felt a prickly sensation of uneasiness crawl through him. "I haven't made any plans to tell her," he answered.

"But you must, my love. That's what I want to talk about now. Because I want to tell Howard at the same time . . ."

He squeezed her hand hard, stopping her. "I don't see why," he said frankly, "why we should tell anybody anything."

"But we'll have to."

"Why?"

"We'll have to start divorce proceedings sometime."

"Divorce!"

"We can't go on like this forever."

He stared at her. No, of course, he hadn't presumed that this situation would endure quite forever. It was, simply pleasant while it lasted.

"So if Vivian hasn't guessed by this time, you'll simply have to tell her."

"Diana, please listen to me." He moved closer to her on the leather seat so their shoulders and their knees touched. While one hand squeezed hers affectionately and reassuringly, his other stroked her bare arm lightly. "Darling, don't you understand the spot I'm in?"

She shook her head frankly.

"My job . . . my business . . .

I owe everything to Vivian's family connections."

"What difference does that make?"

"What difference! If I divorced Vivian, I'd starve. We'd starve."

Her eyes were warm, loving. She leaned even closer, lifted her lips and brushed his softly. "Wint darling, I wouldn't mind. It would be thrilling to starve with you."

If he had ever had any doubts concerning her shallowness and stupidity, those doubts dissolved at that moment.

"Don't you want to marry me, Wint?"

"Well of course I do. But don't you think . . ." He made one last, desperate, hopeful stab. "Don't you think everything is pretty good as it is now? After all, we have the advantages without the disadvantages."

The look in her eyes didn't change—a look that combined complete love with just as complete determination. He decided at that moment, regretfully, that the end had come.

Vivian, from across the dining table, eyed him carefully. "Wint, aren't you going to do something?"

"What should I do?"

"Maybe you should go next door and investigate."

He tried to orient himself in the

present, to disengage from the past. How much time had elapsed since they'd heard the shot? A minute? A minute and a half?

"Whatever it was, it's all over with now," he said.

"It's over with," he had told Diana.

She had been looking at him steadily for some time, leaving her martini untasted. Her eyes were glass, with no real expression in them, mere imitations of human eyes. The essence of Diana Lister had retreated deep into some hidden recess, trying to keep from being hurt.

But he pursued her. "It's finished," he said.

She would neither comment nor ask questions. True, this was a little bombshell, and he had not expected eloquence. But he didn't like this silence of hers. It had an ominous quality.

"You see, Diana, it really didn't start out to be serious. We were both rather bored, and we discovered we could amuse each other. Then it just sort of crept up on us. You fell in love with me, and of course I fell in love with you." He told the lie without hesitation. "But if I tried to divorce Vivian, it would be curtains for me. I'm thirty-six, Diana. You don't go out and start all over



again at that age. Now I know we can't go on just amusing each other because, like I said, we're in love. So there's only one thing to do. Make a clean break. It'll be hard at first, but it'll be the best thing in the long run."

He stopped talking because he realized he was making no progress. She was sitting there, still staring at him, and dumbly shaking her head.

"I can't let you go, Wint." Words came suddenly, in a low, frightened voice. "I couldn't go on living without you. I love you, Wint."

"I know that, darling. I love you, and we'll have this knowledge of each other's love to carry us through this tough period of adjustment."

"All right, I won't insist that you divorce Vivian right now. We can work it out some way, as long as we have each other, as long as . . ."

"No! It's got to be a clean break, Diana. Complete and final."

The tears were coming at last.

"I'll kill myself!"

And now, while he and Vivian entertained the Jennings at a quiet dinner, across the way at the Listers there had been the sound of a shot.

Panic threatened him. Vivian had quipped about the Listers

shooting at each other, but he was fairly certain that Howard was gone on one of his frequent trips. He hadn't seen Diana for four weeks, but he'd kept a wary eye on the place. She hadn't tried to call him, or to write letters. He had even begun to hope that he'd gotten rid of her, had escaped unscathed.

But now had she been so stupid, so foolish, as to shoot herself? Not that he would really mind. If she were dead, he would be permanently rid of her, as long as he wasn't involved. The awful question was, was he involved?

His mind, fogged for the past moment by memories of how he'd gotten into this mess, began finally to focus upon the grim present. If Diana had shot herself, if she were dead, what would link the suicide to him? Was he in the clear?

His *picture!* With a horrible, sick feeling, he remembered that he'd succumbed to her little romantic request for a picture. "To hold next to my heart when you're not with me," she'd said, and he had fallen for it. His ego had been pleased that she so adored him. He'd given her a small snapshot, the wallet or passport variety, and she'd been so happy she'd kissed it before she put it into her purse. *Where was it now?*

Once his mind began to search

for dangers, they multiplied. Had Diana written a note? Suicides often do. Would that note name him, point at him? And how would that look, to his business associates, to Vivian?

Suppose . . . suppose the suicide attempt hadn't been quite successful? He could see the newspapers, hear the gossip—attempted suicide of attractive blonde blamed on philandering neighbor—and Diana, with a tiny scratch on her arm, gaudily bandaged, chattering hysterically about her shattered romance with Wint Marshall.

"Wint!"

"Yes?" He halted, realizing that he'd moved, that he'd risen from the table, and had been leaving the room.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see what's happening at the Listers'."

He rushed out, taking the quickest way, through the garage. It was still raining. He remembered vaguely now that a drizzle had started when the Jennings came. But he was already late, maybe too late, so he took the shortcut anyway. He didn't mind the wet leaves as he went through the hedge, didn't mind the mud there that he almost slipped on.

Lights were on in several rooms of the Lister house. But he could see nothing, because the draperies

were drawn in the lighted rooms. The place was silent, as if it were empty.

He took two steps toward the front door, ready to knock or ring the bell, till it occurred to him that somebody in there might be alive and holding a gun—Howard, who would turn it on him, or Diana, who might want to take her lover with her, and do the same thing. He still had the key to the small door into the garage. He rummaged in his wallet, found it, put it into the lock, and opened the door.

The garage was dark, but he knew the route well enough to be able to feel along the wall till he came to the kitchen door. The kitchen was dark too, but again he was in familiar territory. He managed to find his way without making any noise.

The nearest illumination was in the livingroom. He stole toward it. One lamp, he could see, was on. The light from it was dim. Then, around the edge of a wall, he saw Diana.

She was alone, dressed in a black cocktail dress, sitting in the very center of the sofa. The gun rested on her lap, but clutched in her right hand, with her finger still inside the trigger guard. Faint in the room was the acrid smell of cordite. The gun had been fired.

On Diana's left arm, high, near the shoulder, was a red gash, from which blood had run down, down to her elbow, onto her skirt, and from there to the seat of the sofa.

He stared at her in amazement. She'd lost weight. There was a boniness in her features now, a hollowness in her cheeks. Under her eyes were dark, puffy half-moons, accentuated by the dreadful pallor of her face, but the eyes themselves were reddish, blurred. Those eyes looked at nothingness, and Wint Marshall wondered—could she possibly imagine that she has killed herself, that she's already dead?

But worse thoughts raced through his brain, thoughts of his own predicament. News of this would inevitably leak out, as well as the explanation. The notoriety, the accusations, infidelity, Vivian an object of pity and ridicule; she wouldn't endure it for a moment. He'd be out, ruined, with no hope of a comeback.

If this stupid female here could be silenced!

He acted, from that point on, according to the dictates of the deepest instinct for self-preservation. He didn't pause to plan or consider. He approached her cautiously, behind the sofa, to get on her right side. She didn't move, and at first did not even seem to

be aware of his presence. He sat down next to her, but not too close, and away from the direction the gun was pointing.

"Wint, I've missed you so much."

"And I've missed you."

"You've come back then?" A light flickered in her dead eyes.

"I'm here . . ."

"I guess I didn't put the gun in the right place; it jumped. I'll find some other way to do it, Wint, if you don't stay with me . . ."

Of course she would. She was stubborn. So he had no choice.

"Darling, let me have the gun. I don't want you to get hurt."

He put his hand under her right hand, wrapped his fingers around hers, squeezed his index finger inside the trigger guard on top of hers. He did it all gently, carefully. She was pliant, unresisting. She didn't even seem to notice what he was doing, or at least the significance of it.

He lifted her hand with the gun still in it. He had to turn her wrist a little in doing so, but he managed to put the barrel of the small pistol between her breasts. Trustful, she did not resist. With the same gentleness as before, he pulled the trigger.

The report was surprisingly loud. Diana's head jerked around, so that for one tiny second she looked at him; knowing, under-

standing. Then her head fell to the other side, and her body tipped forward. He let go of her hand and the gun quickly. She slipped off the sofa and onto the rug, in a twisted little heap, silent and motionless.

He got up and moved away instantly. He saw the pool of blood widening beneath the corpse. And then he saw too his own muddy tracks on the rug. Panic threatened him for a moment, till he realized that he wasn't going to try to conceal his presence here.

But he would have to move fast. His dinner companions would have heard the second shot. Vivian might be concerned about him. She might send Phil Jennings across to investigate, or she might even come herself. Anyway, someone would be here in minutes.

He couldn't conduct his search in those muddy shoes, leaving an obvious trail wherever he went, so he slipped out of them and headed immediately for Diana's bedroom. Then he stopped and cursed aloud. Why hadn't he asked Diana where the picture was, or whether she'd left a note? It would have been so simple!

He fought against his own near panic. In the bedroom the ceiling light was on. Disarray was everywhere. Do your job, he told himself.

A suicide leaves a note in a conspicuous place, wanting it to be found. A hasty glance told him there was no note, at least in this bedroom. Picture—when he'd first given it to her, she'd stuck it into her purse. Why shouldn't it be there now?

He moved swiftly, handkerchief out, wiping his prints off everything he touched. Purses, there were a dozen of them in the closet. No picture. Diana's money purse was on her boudoir table. Credit cards, membership cards, assorted junk, but no picture. Drawers—the ones that belonged to Diana—nothing. Jewelry box . . .

Why hadn't he asked her where it was! He was losing his grip, wasting energy, wasting time. He had to think.

Then it was too late. The doorbell rang. He had to answer it. When he opened the front door, Phil Jennings was standing there. He looked relieved when he saw Wint.

"The woman shot herself," Wint said. "Go back and call the police and a doctor."

Phil had been trying to see past Wint's shoulder. Wint stepped aside enough for him to look, but not enough to let him in. "What are you going to do?" Phil asked.

"I'll stay here."

Phil was pale, too confused to

question the division of tasks. He disappeared into the darkness of the yard, and Wint shut the door behind him.

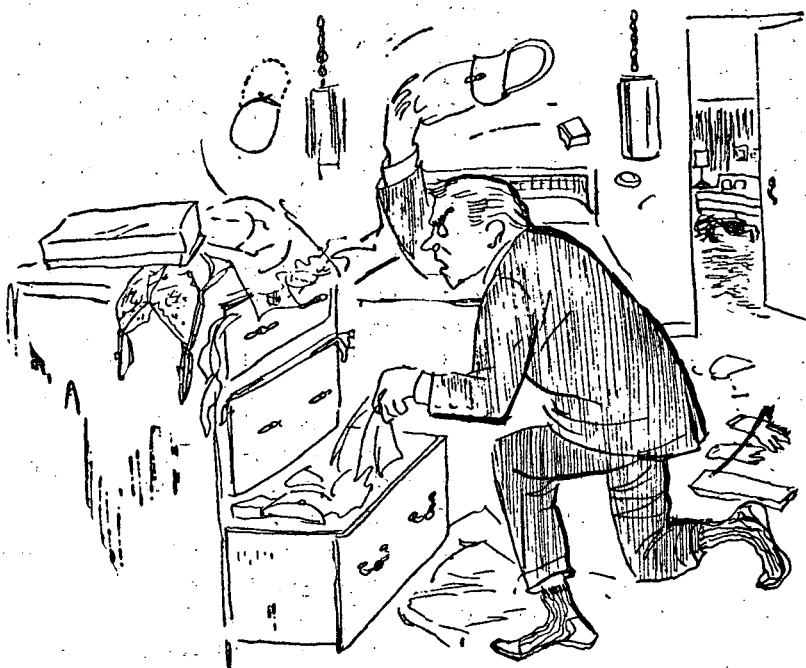
Now he had a few extra minutes in which to work. Maybe not more than five, depending on how fast Phil was with the telephone. So he was bold now, in his stockinged feet. He turned on lights freely, searched every room for the note. In two minutes he was satisfied there wasn't any, which made sense. Diana's mind hadn't been on her husband, and she wouldn't leave a note to her lover here in

this house. That was almost certain.

The problem of the picture remained. Would the police search the house? Why should they? No, Howard would find it, later on. Howard might be talked out of it. Maybe . . .

But there was nowhere else to look, short of turning the house upside down. She could have lost it, he thought suddenly. Yes, there were a lot of things she could have done with it.

The doorbell rang again. It was too late for anything now except a brazen pretense of innocence. Pro-



ected by the drawn draperies, he slipped back into his muddied shoes. When he opened the door, he saw a pair of uniformed policemen and a car in the driveway.

"We were eating dinner and we heard the first shot," he began. "I live next door . . ."

But the two cops weren't interested in his story. They'd only come to take charge of the scene, to see that people like him didn't disturb anything. He watched them as they looked around and took notes.

The notes were for Lieutenant Benjamin of Homicide. He was a small, dark man who came and talked quietly and never smiled. He surveyed the situation, looked at the notes, and gave some orders. Then he turned to Wint Marshall.

"We heard this shot from next door," Wint told him. "We had guests for dinner, and we were still sitting around the table. We didn't do anything for a couple of minutes, while my wife kept saying it sounded like a shot and I ought to come over here and see. Well, I came over and rang the bell, but nobody answered. But some lights were on, and I thought maybe there was somebody hurt in here. Well, I managed to get in through the garage, and there was Diana—Mrs. Lister—sitting on the sofa with her arm all bloody and

the gun still in her hand. I started toward her and I said, 'Give me that gun.' She waved the gun around and told me to stay away from her, so I backed off. I tried to talk to her but she wouldn't answer . . ."

"She didn't say anything, huh?"

"Just warned me not to come near her."

"Okay, then what?"

"Well, my talking didn't do any good. She shot herself."

"You saw her actually fire the second shot?"

"Yes."

"Did you try to stop her then?"

Wint hesitated. He knew about tests that could be made on a person's hand to determine whether that hand had fired a gun.

"Well, I'm kind of confused about what happened exactly. When I saw her point the gun at herself, I jumped toward her to try to stop her."

"You wrestled for the gun?"

Wint felt sweat on his palms. "Well, no. I think I got to her just as she fired, or a split second afterward, but we didn't fight over the gun."

"You saw her die?"

"Yes, she just fell off the sofa and landed there on the rug."

It was a good story, a little blurred, as it naturally would be. As a witness to a suicide, he ought

to be in a state of semi-shock. Lieutenant Benjamin acted neither sympathetic nor suspicious. He told Wint he could go home now, and he'd be questioned again later.

Vivian and the Jennings were waiting for him. Vivian was so amazed at having a suicide next door she didn't think to be suspicious.

"Why do you suppose she did it?" she wondered. "She was young, pretty, well off. Trouble with Howard maybe?"

"Howard will have to enlighten us about that."

He excused himself as quickly as he could, went to the bathroom and washed his hands thoroughly. He was beginning to feel sick now, a delayed reaction, not to Diana's death nor to his having caused it, but to the tremendous risk he had taken.

Beyond the hedge the Listers' house was ablaze with lights; Benjamin's men searching. What if they found that picture? A hitherto obvious suicide would take on new dimensions.

They'd heard the first shot about eight-thirty. At a quarter to ten the Marshalls' doorbell rang, and it was Benjamin. Wint came out of the bathroom, pale and queasy.

Benjamin asked quiet questions, and received corroboration of at least part of Wint's story. It was

clear that the first shot had come while the Marshalls and the Jennings were dining. It was also clear that Wint Marshall investigated the shot only at his wife's insistence. As Wint listened, he felt more confident. He had an alibi.

Then the lieutenant sprang his little surprise. "This is a case of homicide," he began, "and we always take that as a serious matter. We want to get the precise facts. Mr. Jennings, Mr. Marshall, we hope you don't mind giving us your fingerprints."

"Fingerprints!" It was Phil.

Benjamin nodded. "We've taken a print off the doorbell button. That should be yours, Mr. Jennings. And the print on the key in the lock in the garage door, that should be yours, Mr. Marshall."

The key! The key Diana had given him so he could come in any time he wanted to! Had he actually left it in the lock?

"By the way, Mr. Marshall, how did you find that key to get in the garage door?" Smooth, calm. Benjamin lighted a cigarette as he asked the question.

Wint's answer was equally as smooth. "I remember now, it was in the lock. I was glad of that because I didn't have to break a window or anything."

Benjamin seemed satisfied. He phoned the Listers', called his man

over, and in five minutes he had both sets of prints. "What I'm really after," the lieutenant explained, "is to make sure there are no strange prints around the Lister house."

"Strange prints?" Wint asked.

"You didn't see anybody around the place, Mr. Marshall, so I guess there wasn't anybody while you were there at least, but there might have been somebody earlier. You see, what we haven't established yet is the motive. Why should a pretty young woman like Mrs. Lister have committed suicide?"

"You might check with her husband on that," Vivian suggested.

"I will when he gets here," Benjamin promised. "He's been notified. One other little thing, Mr. Marshall. I said we wanted to get the precise details on this. You told us you grabbed for Mrs. Lister as she pulled the trigger. We'd like to know how close you got. Could you come down to headquarters and take a paraffin test? That might show us whether you actually got a hand on the gun as it was being fired."

Wint didn't like the way things were going. Why couldn't Benjamin be satisfied with the obvious facts? He could scarcely refuse to take the test, so he rode downtown with the lieutenant. On the way there was desultory conversation.

Benjamin wanted to know about Diana Lister. Wint professed to have been rather poorly acquainted with her.

There was a technician waiting at headquarters for them. He poured a double layer of paraffin over both Wint's hands, since Wint had professed not to remember quite how he had grabbed for the gun, with cotton in between the two layers. When these casts were peeled off, some kind of liquid was poured into them. They waited about twenty minutes. Then, in the right-hand cast a few, a very few, dark blue specks appeared.

"Positive," the lieutenant said. "Mr. Marshall, your hand was very near the gun, or maybe right on it."

"I've already told you that," Wint answered.

"But now we're a little more sure."

Lieutenant Benjamin was going to be a problem. It was as if he knew something he wasn't divulging, but was waiting to put all the pieces together. Could the police have found the picture?

A uniformed cop took Wint home. The Jennings had waited for his arrival. He had to tell them and Vivian everything. When they left, Vivian was thoughtful.

"Why did you have to get yourself involved?" she challenged him.



"You kept telling me to go and investigate."

"Investigating is one thing, but trying to stop Diana Lister from shooting herself was quite another."

"Do you mean I should have just stood and watched?"

She shrugged coolly. "Was it really any of your concern, darling?"

Lieutenant Benjamin dropped by the office the next day. Wint's secretary announced the visitor in a noncommittal voice; the morning papers had carried a partial story.

"Thought you'd like to keep up with the case first-hand," the lieutenant said. "I've spent the morning with Howard Lister."

"Was he any help?"

"The guy's in pretty bad shape. According to him, his wife had been a little moody for the past several months, a little withdrawn. 'Preoccupied' was the word he used. Then about four weeks ago the symptoms got worse. She became very depressed. Of course he never imagined she would take her own life. But the strange thing is that Mr. Lister, her husband, the man who lived with her and should have understood her, can give no explanation for the preoccupation, for the depression, or for the suicide. He questioned his

wife a number of times and she told him nothing. And he claims that he gave her no cause for unhappiness. He was a good provider, and a faithful husband."

Wint declined to comment.

"We found a good thumbprint of your friend Jennings on the front doorbell. None of yours though, Mr. Marshall. You did say you rang the bell, didn't you? That would have given Mrs. Lister a warning that somebody was coming."

"Jennings' print must have erased mine," Wint pointed out. "Yes, I did try the front door first."

"We got a good right thumb print of yours on the key to that garage door, thanks to the fact you left the door open and protected it from the rain. And so far we've got no strange prints."

Wint felt a trifle easier. In their search for evidence of an unknown party, the police apparently had found no indications of his looking for the picture.

"Suicides usually like to be alone," the lieutenant mused, "yet Mrs. Lister shot herself right in front of you."

"People jump off buildings in front of crowds."

"Sure, I know. By the way, Mr. Marshall, we borrowed your muddy shoes from your wife this morning. All the tracks inside and

outside the Lister house seem to be yours. My theory hasn't panned out."

"What was your theory, Lieutenant?"

Benjamin sat slumped in his chair, his eyes staring past Wint, maybe to the window, maybe toward nothing. His expression was enigmatic. Yet there was something about him, a zeal, a dedication, that made him distinctly menacing.

"I was looking for a mystery man. This guy didn't actually pull the trigger on Diana Lister; but he was the guy who made her do it. He was her lover."

Wint stayed calm. "What makes you think she had a lover?"

"I sensed it. Then Howard Lister's story backed me up. What's the thing most likely to send a woman into a depression? Disappointment in love."

Wint refused to panic. If Benjamin had found the picture, he'd have said so. And even if he had, Diana's death was still suicide, not murder.

"That poor woman shot herself all right," Benjamin went on. "We did the paraffin test on her too. Her hand fired the gun. But the man who made her do it is the real culprit."

"What could you do to him even if you found him?" Wint asked

with appropriate interest, no more.

"That depends," Benjamin said, "on how close I could link him to the crime."

He got up to go. At the door he turned back. "Lister's pretty broken up. Says he doesn't want to live in that house any more. He's moved to a hotel already. My men may be in and out a few times. So if you see any suspicious-looking characters hanging around the place, don't bother to call the police. They'll be the police."

Diana Lister was put into the ground. Wint and Vivian attended the burial services. Vivian commented on the widower's stolidity at the graveside.

"He could have at least put on a little better show," she said. "He could display just a little remorse. After all, he drove her to it."

Wint didn't argue. Let her think that. Let everybody think that. It was convenient.

The only trouble was that Lieutenant Benjamin didn't think it. Benjamin knew better, and he wasn't going to let the matter rest. He had a theory, a logical, accurate theory, and he hadn't given up trying to prove it. There was only one thing which could prove it—the picture.

How painstaking a search of the house had the police made? There was no way of telling. But police

still went there occasionally; they were up to something. And at any time Howard could change his mind, could return to the house, start gathering up Diana's belongings, perhaps, or just browse through them.

Wint Marshall would be involved in a scandal then, not just the scandal of a love affair, but of a suicide. And whether Benjamin could prove murder against him or not, his whole social and business world would be ruined. He'd be a dead man.

It was entirely a matter then, of who found the picture first. Right after the funeral Wint got his chance.

Howard came over to where Wint and Vivian were standing. His big, plain face was almost expressionless, but the muscles were taut, and his voice was hoarse. "Wint, I haven't had a chance to thank you."

"I didn't do anything."

"You tried. I want to thank you."

"Okay, Howard."

"Could you do me a favor? I don't want to go back to that house. I'd like to leave the key with you, in case somebody needs to be let in."

"Sure thing, Howard."

He almost grabbed the key out of Howard's hand. This was a fan-

tastic bit of luck. He only hoped he was concealing his exultation.

But it was a whole week before his opportunity came. He wanted to get into the Lister house in the daytime, so he wouldn't have to light up the place. He faked a bad case of indigestion in order to stay home, and he watched from his window. The teams from Homicide hadn't been around for days. Only the lieutenant himself visited now, the lieutenant and one plain-clothesman who chauffeured him. He came every morning, stayed half an hour or so, probably trying to find some lead to that missing 'lover'. But then he left, and nobody from the police came back the rest of the day.

Vivian had been nursing Wint, but finally she just had to get to the beauty salon, and do some shopping. She left the house at nine. The lieutenant departed minutes afterward.

Wint didn't hesitate. He dressed, took his old route through the hedge, and boldly entered the Lister house with Howard's key. The livingroom was the same as he'd last seen it, except for one item. Diana's body was gone. There was now only a huge rust-colored stain on the beige carpet. And there too, he saw, were his own muddy footprints, intermingled with the old blood, the

whole drama of his crime preserved, fossilized, for all to see.

He leaned against the wall, shaken, sick. The picture—the nagging terror of what that little piece of paper could do to him if the wrong people found it—find the thing! Find it, if it takes all day, all night; if you have to tear the house apart!

He lurched into Diana's bedroom, and searched all over again, the same as on the night of the murder. Jewelry box, purses, drawers—only this time he wasn't as careful. He didn't care about leaving prints. He didn't care about leaving things exactly as they'd been. There was an overriding necessity now—*find it!*

But it wasn't anywhere. He ripped the jewelry box apart, tore the lining out of Diana's purses, went into drawers of clothing, cosmetics, left the contents strewn about. He did the same with closet shelves, hatboxes, garment bags, the bed, pillows, pillowcases, everything . . .

He was looking behind the pictures on the wall when he saw the man in the doorway, a stranger in a plain dark suit, and with a weary smile on his face. This man looked at him for a moment, then went to the telephone on the table by Diana's bed, and dialed a number.

"Lieutenant," he said into the phone, "he's here."

"There had to be someone involved with Mrs. Lister," Benjamin said. He stood in the middle of the Lister livingroom, his hands in his trouser pockets, quiet, relaxed, not even triumphant. "You were the most likely candidate."

Wint Marshall tried to think, tried to muster his resources.

"Oh, we realize that Mrs. Lister made a suicide attempt. She fired the first shot. But we all know that shot failed. Then you came to 'investigate'. The business of the key in the garage door wasn't conclusive, but it was strange. Then there was the paraffin test. Again not conclusive, since you had maintained you tried to stop her. What we liked better, Mr. Marshall, was your muddy footprints."

Wint jerked to attention. "What?"

"There was quite a mixture of mud and blood there on the rug. We were a little while untangling it. You said you leaped for Mrs. Lister when she started to fire the gun the second time. Well, the evidence on the rug didn't corroborate that. There were your footprints in front of the sofa indicating that you were *sitting* there next to Mrs. Lister, *before* the second shot. How do we know it was

before, not after? Because her blood was *on top of* the footprints. You sat next to her while she was still alive. Simple?"

Wint stared at the place on the rug. He thought he saw the pattern, but he couldn't be sure. He'd wait for the explanation.

"So we concluded, Mr. Marshall, that you sort of helped Mrs. Lister fire that second shot."

He shook his head weakly.

"I considered arresting you immediately, but there was a missing factor—motive. Why should the man next door rush over here and help this poor woman complete her attempted suicide? Why, unless he were romantically involved with her? Why should she want to die unless she'd been abandoned? Why should he abandon her unless she were going to expose him? If he'd been involved with her, wouldn't he want to destroy all evidence of that involvement? So we set a little trap. Had Mr. Lister give you a key. Then in sight of your windows, I came and went from this house every day, with a companion, except that the man with whom

I left was always a different man from the one with whom I came. I was relieving the guard every morning, you might say. There was always a man here, waiting for you. And you came. But you didn't find the picture, did you?"

Wint Marshall leaped wildly to his feet, and then was restrained by two policemen. "You found it!" he gasped. "Where was it?"

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes, we found it, billfold size. You probably had others made. We'll find those too, and compare them, just to make sure."

Wint managed only a moan this time. "You mean you didn't recognize me from my picture?"

"How could we?"

The lieutenant took a small package from an inner pocket. He unfolded the cardboard, then the tissue paper. Inside was a small wrinkled square of slick paper, blood-stained, and with a round hole in the center of it. A picture without a face.

"It was in a locket Diana Lister wore," Lieutenant Benjamin said. "The bullet went right through it."



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